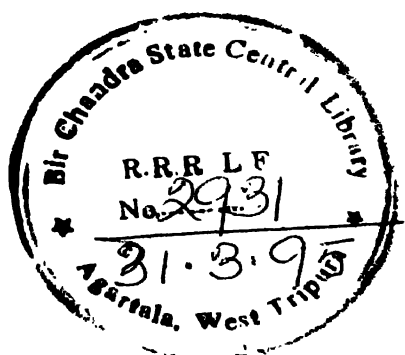


The Working Class in Bengal

Formative Years

Deepika Basu



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In memory of

MY BELOVED MOTHER

PREFACE

Research in Indian Labour History is still in its infancy. There have of course been attempts to present a general outline of the labour movement on an all India plane, but comprehensive studies about Indian labour, region by region are yet to be undertaken. So far as Bengal is concerned some attention has no doubt been paid to labour history by scholars interested in this area of research ; but even here the work is confined to some particular industries like jute, tea etc and the focus of attention is mainly on the period following the First World War with only some stray references to the earlier period. Hardly any attempt has been made to make a thorough survey of the period preceding the First World War, the period which marked the formation of the industrial labour force.

What has prevented the scholars from attempting a study of the early formative phase is perhaps the paucity of materials. The difficulties in this respect are indeed colossal. While it is possible to present a general picture of the condition of work, of health and habitation of the industrial labour force by drawing on the Factory Inspection Reports, it is far difficult to form an account of working class actions and protests on the basis of the archival materials which are wanting because by the decision of the Government almost all such records of labour protest and movements during the early period were destroyed.

That there were innumerable strikes, sporadic, small and even big in the early formative period can be ascertained from newspaper reports, particularly from such newspaper as the Indian Daily News which evinced a keen interest in the conflict between labour and capital. These newspaper reports are, however, fragmentary evidently betraying some missing links. Nevertheless, these reports supplemented by the archival materials can enable us to form a more or less faithful account of the labour movement in Bengal, during the period under review.

The present work is only a limited attempt in that direction. It starts with the Factory Act of 1881 which was in itself a recognition of the fact that a new class was in the process of formation demanding the attention of the Government. It ends with the

Factory Act of 1911 by which date the Working Class in Bengal had taken shape and was demanding recognition as a new social force.

For a fuller appreciation of the role of the Working Class in its present context it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of its origins and the process of its formation. The birth marks, the specification of the process of formation leave their imprint on the further development of the class and give it an identity of its own. The purpose of the present work is therefore to present a general picture of the labour force in Bengal as it existed in the early formative years. It deals with the growth in the size of the labour population, their condition of work, the length of the working hours, the wage rates, the housing condition and sanitation, the risks involved in factory work, number of accidents etc. It pays special attention to the rise of the labour movement starting from the spontaneous and sporadic outbursts to organised strike struggles.

In dealing with the history of the Working Class Movement the international factor is to be taken into consideration. The Working Class is an international class in the sense that this class in all the countries of the world has some common characteristics—the same working condition, the same wage system, similar types of slums, subordination of workers to machinery and the risks involved in their work and so on. Can we think of the birth of the Indian Working Class in isolation from the Industrial Revolution and Industrial Capitalism? Can we think of the Indian Working Class today in isolation from the Scientific and Technological Revolution which has its epicentre in the Western World? But despite its international links the working class is also very much a national class. It is shaped by the internal relations out of which it emerges as a social force. It takes its rise in a particular country in a particular environment, in particular circumstances. It is this originality, this uniqueness as Gramsci puts it, that leads it a national character.

There is a constant attempt in this book to steer clear between two extremes, one which tends to look at the Indian Working Class not as it is but as it should be, a finished product of industrialism and the other which seeks to deny the existence of a working class in the proper sense of the term, which it claims, is still a prisoner

of its primordial, casteist, communal loyalties. I have endeavoured to place the problem in its proper perspective. While due attention has been given to its weaknesses due to incomplete industrial growth and presence of pre-capitalist socio-economic formations, the story of its evolution through stages has been traced with proper care which indicates that with all its limitations a distinctly new class has come into existence.

As I have said, in my study it has been my continuous effort to bring out as clearly as possible the distinctive features of the Indian Working Class. But how far I have succeeded in achieving this object is a matter for the reader to judge.

I take this opportunity to thank the staff of the West Bengal State Archives, the National Archives, New Delhi and the National Library, Calcutta for their assistance and cooperation in the work of collecting materials. I am grateful to Professor Chiranjib Kaviraj for the interest he has taken in the book when it was still in the stage of preparation. His suggestions for improvement have been of immense help. Professor Deepa Mukerji was good enough to go through the entire typescript. I am grateful to her for her active co-operation. I am immensely thankful to Dr. Sunil Sen, formerly Head of the Department of History, Rabindra Bharati University for his salutary advice and encouragement. I am deeply indebted to Professor Narahari Kaviraj for inspiration, valuable advice and ungrudging help all through the course of my present work, no formal thanks can express my gratitude. Thanks are also due to Messrs K P Bagchi & Co. for kindly undertaking the work of publication.

D. B.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Annual Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act in Bengal	: ARWIFAB
Annual General Administration Report	: AGAR
Report of the Indian Factory Commission 1890	: RIFC 1890
Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission 1896	: RLEC 1896
Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908	: RIFLC 1908
Report on the Inspection of Mines in India	: RIMI
Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India	: RCIMI
Report on the Administration of Railways in India	: RARI
Indian Daily News	: IDN
Amrita Bazar Patrika	: ABP
Report on Native Papers	: RNP

1

RISE OF FACTORY INDUSTRY AND EMERGENCE OF THE WORKING CLASS

Till the middle of the 19th century India had a vast working people but no working class. Without a factory industry there can be no working class worth the name. The modern proletariat came into being along with the capitalist mode of production. India's modern factory industry dates back to the forceful intrusion of British capital on Indian soil. Once Industrial Revolution was accomplished in England the large scale industry brought all the peoples of the earth into relationship with one another by lumping all the small local markets into one world market. It was a circuitous process through which India came to be linked with the industrialised nations of Europe, particularly Britain. This process, however, proved to be the thin end of the wedge for it gradually turned India into a British colony. As the mechanism of colonialism came to be pressed in full, England was soon to become 'the workshop of the world' and all other countries were to become for England . . . markets for her manufactured goods supplying her in return with raw materials and food-stuff. India naturally became an 'agrarian appendage of England'.¹ In the face of challenge from cheap machinemade goods India's age-old cottage and handicraft industries were in the throes of death. It was not, however, a one way process. For deep economic penetration the English, out of necessity introduced railways, developed roads, electricity, telegraph etc. which in their turn led to the ushering in of modern industries. Consequent upon the Industrial Revolution in England, railroads were laid in India for reaching out to greater overseas markets and better manipulation of raw materials. The construction of railways further laid the foundation for a new stage of development—the railway system became 'the forerunner of modern industry'.²

1. Engels, *Protection & Free Trade, On Colonialism*, Moscow, pp. 233-36.
2. Karl Marx, *The Future Results of the British Rule in India*, *op. cit.*, p. 79

Thus modern factory industry made its appearance in India with its pattern set by the colonial context and that explains why its industrial development was neither rapid nor remarkable. The two foremost industries—jute and cotton, both were agro-based industries. These two industries which had their beginning during the second half of the 19th century—jute primarily in Bengal and cotton, mainly centered in Bombay were at first encouraged to produce raw materials to feed the machinery in Britain. Some progress was also discernible in mining industry, iron and steel industry and engineering and some other industries like those of paper, pottery, sugar etc. exhibited a very limited growth. These industries remained extremely localised and confined to Calcutta and its neighbourhood, in the districts of 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly and Burdwan.

Industries in India were not encouraged to develop the productive power of the country. The basic industries like iron and steel did not develop sufficiently to make independent industrial growth possible. Machine tools which were indispensable for factory industry were mostly imported thus leaving India hopelessly dependent on England and other Western countries. Even iron and steel used in large workshops were imported from Europe.³ Not to speak of private enterprise, even government agencies far from encouraging indigenous production continued to import iron and steel from abroad. The experts of Indian Railways which were the largest single customer of steel products had little faith in steel rail made in India. Cumming noted with regret that it was not prudent to meet Indian requirements of pig iron by orders from England while Bengal Iron and Steel Company had to seek a market outside India, in Australia.⁴ While in other independent countries protective import duties safeguarded the indigenous industries, the policy of free trade and the liberal import policy pursued by the British rulers left the infant industries in India a helpless prey to foreign competition.

A notable feature of the industrial development in Bengal was that most of the major industries were controlled and managed by

3. Monograph on Iron and Steel, Government of Bengal, General Department. Miscellaneous Proceedings 17-79, June 1907.

4. J. G. Cumming, *Review of the Industrial Position and Prospects in Bengal in 1908*, Calcutta, 1908, Ch. III.

Europeans, mainly British and the capital invested in them was also European. What prompted Europeans eagerly to invest capital in these industries was purely motive for profit. The entire administrative, political and financial set up in India helped to maintain the dominance of European business houses in newly sprung industries. A small group of European Managing Agency Houses having control over all major industries maintained something like collective monopoly. This was further strengthened by their control of external trade and organised money market. They received official patronage which was totally denied to indigenous enterprise.⁵ The Census Report of 1911 confirmed that European owners predominated in the more important industries such as, tea gardens, machinery, engineering works and jute mills. Not a single jute mill was under Indian ownership and even in the case of jute presses the Indian ownership was slightly in a minority. About two thirds of the cotton mills in Bengal were owned by foreigners and the collieries were fairly evenly divided for nearly half were owned by Europeans. . . . only a portion of small insignificant branches of industry was monopolised by Indians and these were brass foundries, oil mills, rice mills, boot and shoe factories, brick, tile and surki works etc.⁶ India had to pay heavily for these foreign investments which were steadily growing in volume and as a result was subjected to heavy economic drain.

For reasons of extreme poverty India's home market remained very limited. It was further handicapped by unequal foreign competition. Thus Indian industries had no choice but to depend on outside world markets.

These were the factors responsible for not allowing the industrial development to proceed along its natural course. The development was stunted and the growth was not steady. The industries had to suffer from periodic crisis and depression. The highly organised industrialists with the full backing of the colonial government always endeavoured to shift the burden of such crises on the shoulders of the working class who were the inevitable product of this new industrial phenomenon. Through mutual arrangements steps were taken for curtailment of working hours

5. Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Private Investment in India 1900-1939*. Orient Longman, 1975, pp. 165, 171.

6. *Report on the Census of India, 1911*, Vol V, Part I, Ch. XII.

and restriction of production. This entailed sufferings on the workers who were hard hit as a result of loss of wage, retrenchment and so on.

Again while investing in industries in this country the European business community found here an alluring incentive in the cheap labour force. While the working hours were inordinately long, wages were astonishingly low. The workers who were at first unorganised and inarticulate were in course of time growing in number and also becoming conscious of their position. They gradually stood up against this intense exploitation. The condition of the workers in this new set up and the story of their resistance to this exploitative system constitute the subject of discussion in the following chapters.

THE BEGINNINGS

Railways. Railways which actually inaugurated the so-called industrial era in India had their beginning in the fifties of the 19th century. The first railway ran over a stretch of 21 miles from Bombay to Thana in April 1853. The first passenger train steamed out of Howrah Station to reach its destination, Hooghly, a distance of 24 miles on 15 August 1854. On 3 February 1855 the line was opened upto Ranigunge. Thus the first section of the East Indian Railway was opened to public traffic inaugurating railway transport on the eastern side of India.⁷

On 31 March 1884 the total extent of railways in India open to traffic was 10,832½ miles and the extent of railway mileage under construction was 3,457½ miles. On 30 September 1883 the total number of employees of all races on open lines of railway in India was 185,261 of which 3,995 were Europeans, 3,979 East Indians and 177,287 Indians. It shows Indians formed 95.69 p.c. of the entire body of railway servants. During 1883-1884 the total number of employees of the East Indian Railway was 49,110, of them 1049 were Europeans, 607 Eurasians and 47,454 Indians. The total number of persons employed on the Eastern Bengal Railway amounted to 6,552 Indians and 273 Europeans.⁸ Once introduced, the railway system made rapid progress directly

7. J. N. Sahni, *Indian Railways, One Hundred Years, 1853-1953*, New Delhi, 1953, Ch. I.

8. *Report on the Administration of Railways in India* (henceforth referred to as RARI), 1883-84, pp. 89, 96, 111.

giving employment to a large number of people and it also helped the growth of other associate industries.

The following table shows the rate of increase in the number of railway employees in course of years.⁹

	Europeans	Eurasians	Indians	Total
1896	4665	6696	271734	283095
1899	5292	7393	329089	341774
1902	5875	8269	378373	392517
1911	7699	9877	545454	563030

It indicates that in the course of 15 years the number of persons employed in the railways almost doubled; and Indians formed by far the largest percentage of the entire working force.

It is however significant to note that while the majority of the common workers were coming from Indian stock, the officers and top personnel were overwhelmingly British. 'The companies were not interested in training Indians for the higher position nor in giving them advanced technical training. India remained for many decades in the anomalous position of having the largest railway system in Asia with virtually no Indians in posts of real responsibility.'¹⁰

Shipping and Dockyard. Another modern enterprise was application of steam to shipping. In 1832 the East India Company had about 7 steam vessels in India while 4 others belonged to private companies. Under colonial rule India lost her national shipping industry and continued to supply seamen in large number on European ships visiting its ports. These Indian seamen were the most exploited among the 'Vagabonds of the Sea'.¹¹

In the district of Howrah, dockyards and roperies continued to be the principal industry during the first half of the 19th century. These were worked with European capital on European methods.

9. *Ibid.*, 1900, 1902, 1911.

10. Daniel Thorner, *The Shaping of Modern India*, New Delhi, 1980, p. 115.

11. According to available information about the number of seamen in or about 1935 India occupied fourth place in the world. The number of Indian seamen exceeded all other countries except Great Britain, USA and Japan.—Dinakar Desai, *Maritime Labour in India*, Bombay 1940, pp. 18-19.

Docks are known to have been established at Howrah as early as 1796 when Mr Bacon opened a dockyard at Salkea. Then during 1800-1850 a number of dockyards came up. In 1872 there were 8 large docks along the river between Howrah and Ghusuri besides small mud docks.¹² In these docks as also at the docks at Kidderpore a large labour force was in constant employment. In the year 1898 there were altogether 9 dockyards in Bengal situated in the districts of Howrah and 24 Parganas where 5615 persons (5239 adult males and 376 male children) were daily employed.¹³

Jute. The foremost industry in Bengal was that of jute manufacturing which was managed entirely by British businessmen with British capital (mainly Scottish). The industry included jute spinning, weaving and pressing. With the growth of export trade in raw jute the jute pressing industry began to acquire importance. The manufacture of jute into gunnies which were largely required for packing also developed rapidly.

The earliest jute mill was the Wellington Jute Mill at Rishra in Hooghly. It was opened in 1855 by one Mr. George Auckland and was financed by an Indian banian, Babu Biswamber Sen.¹⁴ But the concern never had any marked success. In 1866 the India Jute Mill was opened at Serampore; in 1873 Champdany Jute Mill started work and by 1888 Victoria and Hastings Mills had been added to the number of existing mills and all 5 daily employed more than 11000 hands when worked fully.¹⁵ In the district of 24 Parganas jute manufacturing appears to have started in Alipore Jail in 1868. Then important factory industries developed along the banks of the Hooghly from Budge Budge to Naihati. The Clive Mill was opened in 1874; the Shyamnagar Mill in 1875 and the Budge Budge and Kamarhati Mills in 1877. Some other mills were established during the next decade.

The pressing of jute by machinery into bales for export was started in 1873 and two press houses—the Calcutta Hydraulic

12. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Howrah.

13. Annual Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act in Bengal (henceforth referred to as ARWIFAB) 1897, Gen. Misc., 7-35, September 1898.

14. D. R. Wallace, *Romance of Jute*, Calcutta, 1909. Ch. III.

15. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Hooghly.

Jute Press and the Cossipore Jute Warehouses were established, the latter being the property of Ralli Brothers. It was the largest Press House in Bengal.¹⁶

In the district of Howrah pressing of jute into bales for export and its manufacture into yarns, bags, cloth etc. gave rise to a number of important industrial concerns. Fort Gloster Mill was opened at Uluberia in 1873 ; the Howrah and Sibpur Mills in 1879 and Ganges Mill at Sibpur in 1875.¹⁷ Some more mills began to work in the nineties.

Taken as a whole in the year 1882 there were 20 jute mills, 11 in 24 Parganas, 4 in Hooghly and 5 in Howrah. In the jute mills in Hooghly and Howrah during the year 1882-83, the average number of workhands employed daily were 20,323, of them 10,228 were adult males, 4698 adult females, 3494 young persons and 1923 children.¹⁸

Besides these mills, mention may be made also of Serajgunge Jute Mill in Pabna which was a successful concern. The gunny bags produced by it were sent to all parts of the world. During 1882-83 it employed 1,600 men, 400 women and 250 children.¹⁹

The next few years witnessed little addition to the number of existing jute mills. The extension of the industry took the form of extension or enlargement of the existing concerns rather than increase in numbers. One of the reasons was that the industry was controlled by a few monopoly houses. Moreover, the industry in general suffered from a great depression which continued for some years. The mills were the victims of excessive competition and over production. Owing to the depression in jute market some of the mills remained closed. In order to meet this crisis the mill owners who had the advantage of being well organised, formed an association in 1884 which came to be known as Indian Jute Manufacturers' Association (IJMA). It entered into an agreement in February 1886 to curtail production and to have 4 work-

16. *Ibid.*, 24 Parganas.

17. *Ibid.*, Howrah.

18. Annual General Administration Report (henceforth referred to as AGAR), Burdwan Division 1882-83, Gen. Misc., 1-2, September 1883. The number of operatives employed in the jute mills of 24 Parganas during 1882-83 is not mentioned in the official report.

19. *Ibid.*, Rajshahi and Cooch Bihar Division, 1882-83, Gen. Misc., 3-25, October 1883.

ing days a week in place of 6. It seems this arrangement for short time work led to slight improvement in jute trade though this obviously meant under employment and retrenchment of the workers. As a result of this slight improvement some of the mills which were closed down were reopened and a few mills were added to the list. This temporary recovery notwithstanding there was no marked increase in the size of workpeople. During the year 1888-89 the average daily number of workers employed in the jute mills in Hooghly and Howrah were only 24,525.²⁰

The recovery was only temporary and after 1890-91 again there was a glut in the gunny market. Owing to excess production the operation of jute mills was again restricted and with the exception of a very few, all the mills worked again for only 4 days a week.²¹ The workers' resentment is apparent in the evidences given before the Factory Commission 1890. Quite a number of workhands engaged in different jute mills complained before the Commission that the mills working for 4 days a week had entailed hardships on them by reducing their income and they unambiguously stated their preference for 6 days' work with a holiday on Sunday.²²

The jute industry continued to suffer from such periodic crises and fluctuations. It appears that again during 1893-94 the majority of the jute mills worked 5 days a week. During the rest of the period the jute industry remained on the whole remunerative and a few more mills also started functioning. The margin of profit to the manufacturers had been good and mills with one or two exceptions had paid dividends to the shareholders.²³ This prosperity of the jute industry, however, had no effect on the lot of the workers because there had been no change in the standard of wages paid to the workers which remained surprisingly static for years together.

During 1894-95 Hastings Mill for the first time commenced a system of working at night as well as day, in shifts by the aid of

20. *Ibid.*, Burdwan Division 1888-89, Gen. Misc., 1-4, August 1889.

21. *Ibid.*, Burdwan Division, 1889-90, Gen. Misc., 3-4, November 1890; Presidency Division 1890-91, Gen. Misc., 1-2, October 1891.

22. *Report of the Indian Factory Commission 1890*, (henceforth referred to as RIFC 1890), Evidences.

23. AGAR, Presidency Division 1898-99, Gen. Misc., 1-3, December 1899.

electric lights. Thereafter during 1895-96 electric lights had been fitted to many other mills like the Howrah, the Ganges, the Wellington, the India, the Victoria, the Baranagar and the Titagarh Jute Mills.²⁴ By 1897 majority of the jute mills were lighted with electric light.²⁵ In view of this in most of the mills there had been an increase in the working hours without a corresponding rise in the wages. This therefore became a source of discontent among the workers which led even to strikes. A few mills which offered extra wages of a few annas a week for longer hours of work attracted labour and in consequence some other mills which at first withstood introduction of electric light had been pressed into adopting it to compete with their neighbours and to keep together their workhands.²⁶

During the year 1898, 32 jute mills spread over Hooghly, Howrah and 24 Parganas daily employed on an average 91396 persons of whom 16710 were adult females and 11715 children of either sex. In 18 jute presses situated in 24 Parganas and Howrah the average number of hands daily employed were 8955 of whom 996 were females. That shows that jute mills in Bengal employed in large numbers women and children who had to work full hours like the adult males though they were paid much less.

Cotton. Another foremost Indian industry was cotton. It was centered mainly in Bombay. It was during the fifties of the 19th century that cotton industry was started in India. Bombay Spinning and Weaving Company formed about 1851 started a mill in 1854 and by 1861, 8 mills were working in Bombay. At the initial stage spinning rather than weaving was more important. In course of time looms came to be installed increasingly in order to capture the home market for cloth. In Bengal, however, cotton mills were promoted by Europeans and the industry lagged far behind that in Bombay. The Bowreah Cotton Mill (1818) and the Fort Gloster Mill (1830) owed their origin to European enterprise. The Bowreah Cotton Mill was the oldest cotton mill in India. After Howrah was made the terminus of East Indian Rail-

24. ARWIFAB 1895, Gen. Misc., 11-39, July 1896.

25. *Ibid.*, 1896, Gen. Misc., 1-2, September 1897.

26. *Ibid.*

TABLE 1

Name of Locality and Number of Operatives in Jute Mills During 1898²⁷

Factory	Average Number of Hands Daily Employed							
	Adult				Children			
	Male	Female	Total		Male	Female	Total	Grand Total
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
<i>Hooghly</i>								
1. India Jute Mill, Serampore	1840	520	2360	348	2	350	2710	
2. Wellington Jute Mill, Rishra	2018	355	2373	174	14	188	2561	
3. Hastings Jute Mill, Rishra	5098	1003	6101	416	32	448	6549	
4. Champdani Jute Mill, Champdani	1911	763	2674	297	22	319	2993	
5. Victoria Jute Mill, Telenipara	2053	483	2536	287	53	340	2876	
Total	12920	3124	16044	1522	123	1645	17689	
<i>Howrah</i>								
1. Fort Gloster Jute Mill, Fort Gloster	2879	253	3132	397	—	397	3529	
2. Ganges Jute Mill, Sibpur	2713½	873	3586½	283	39½	322½	3909	
3. Central Jute Mill, Ghosuri	1688½	538½	2227	276½	57½	334	2561	
4. Howrah Jute Mill, Ramkrishnapur	2461	787½	3248½	493	46½	539½	3788	
5. Sibpur Jute Mill (Old), Sibpur	2548½	817½	3366	331	37	368	3734	
6. Sibpur Jute Mill (New), Shibpur	922	326	1248	121½	35	156½	1404½	
7. National Jute Mill, Rajganj	1260	201½	1461½	249	10	259	1720½	
Total	14472½	2797	18269½	2151	225½	2376½	20646	

Continued

27. *Ibid.*, 1898, Gen. Misc. 30-31, August 1899.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
24 Parganas							
1. Budge Budge Jute Mill, Budge Budge	4578	482	5060	1268	18	1286	6346
2. Baranagar South Jute Mill, Baranagar	1501	515	2016	276	79	355	2371
3. Baranagar North Jute Mill, Baranagar	2842	1289	4131	286	187	473	4604
4. Kamarhati Jute Mill	2350	620	2970	234	78	312	3282
5. Clive Jute Mill, Garden Reach	1253	417	1670	399	12	411	2081
6. Upper Hooghly Jute Mill, Garden Reach	1907	492	2399	262	33	295	2694
7. Shyamnagar Jute Mill, Shyamnagar	2551	730	3281	423	80	503	3784
8. Titagarh Jute Mill, Titagarh	3543	830	4373	567	83	650	5023
9. Gauripur Jute Mill, Gauripur	2557	560	3117	626	41	667	3784
10. Union Jute Mill, Sealdah	1555	407	1962	300	—	300	2262
11. Baranagar Branch Jute Mill, Beliaghata	758	330	1088	224	—	224	1312
12. Alipore Jail Jute Mill, Alipore	307	—	307	—	—	—	307
13. Kankinara Jute Mill, Kankinara	2070	475	2545	375	105	480	3025
14. Soorah Jute Mill, Narkeldanga	619	251	870	134	5	139	1009
15. Lower Hooghly Jute Mill, Badartala	1832	363	2195	221	37	258	2453
16. Gordon Mill, Jagatdal	131	54	185	39	34	73	258
17. Standard Jute Mill, Titagarh	986	232	1218	159	6	165	1383
18. Kharda Jute Mills, Kharda	1589	252	1841	166	48	214	2055
19. Anglo Indian Jute Mills, Palghat, Bhatpara	1559	1064	2623	388	258	646	3269
20. Alliance Jute Mill, Jagatdal.	1091	426	1517	200	42	242	1759
Total	35579	9789	45368	6547	1146	7693	53061

Continued

Number of Operatives in Jute Presses during 1898

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Howrah</i>								
1. Ghusuri Jute Press, Ghusuri		45	—	45	—	—	—	45
2. Nasmyth Press, Ghusuri		182½	—	182½	—	—	—	182½
3. Salkea Jute Press, Salkea		250	40	290	—	—	—	290
4. Empress of India Jute Press, Salkea		267	—	267	—	—	—	267
5. West Patent Press, Salkea		300	50	350	—	—	—	350
6. Hydraulic Jute Press, Ghasbagan		174	1	175	—	—	—	175
Total		1218½	91	1309½	—	—	—	1309½
<i>24 Parganas</i>								
1. Hooghly Press, Chitpur		700	40	740	10	—	10	750
2. Calcutta Hydraulic Press, Chitpur		700	50	750	—	—	—	750
3. Asharoft Hydraulic Press, Chitpur		550	60	610	15	—	15	625
4. Victoria Hydraulic Press, Chitpur		88	2	90	—	—	—	90
5. Cossipore Jute Ware House, Cossipore		2500	300	2800	—	—	—	2800
6. Bengal Hydraulic Press, Cossipore		66	22	88	—	—	—	88
7. Strand Bank Press, Chitpur		405	115	520	—	—	—	520
8. Camperdown Press, Chitpur		315	175	490	—	—	—	490
9. Union Jute Press, Chitpur		485	52	537	—	—	—	537
10. Watson's Patent Press, Baghbazar		341	17	358	2	—	2	360
11. Jheel Press, Cossipore		366	47	413	—	—	—	413
12. Chitpur Hydraulic Press, Chitpur		197	25	222	—	—	—	222
Total		6713	905	7618	27	—	27	7645

way several other mills were erected chiefly at Ghusuri and Salkea.²⁸ In the 24 Parganas the oldest mill was the Dunbar Cotton Mill opened in 1875 and the Empress India Mill which started two years later.²⁹

Cotton industry in Bengal from its very inception had to face a double competition. Manchester made goods became a chief competitor for reasons of the policy of free trade and absence of any protective measure for the indigenous industries. The indigenous cotton weaving industry of Bengal which had an ancient and illustrious tradition of its own was destroyed owing to the large importation of English piece goods bringing ruin to millions of weavers. Moreover, Bombay mill products had an added advantage because of an abundant supply of raw material. Another difficulty faced by the cotton industry was violent fluctuations in price of raw cotton due mainly to huge export of cotton to English and Continental spinners.³⁰ These resulted in cotton weaving industry losing ground every year. The cotton industry continued to be in a depressed state and there was no noticeable extension of the industry. The problem of over production hampered development. To overcome the crisis many cotton mills on the pattern of jute mills, restricted production by reducing the hours of labour. This depressed state led to a reduction of 12½ p.c. in wages of the workers.³¹ In both Howrah and 24 Parganas the industry witnessed some encouraging prospects during 1886-87 and this was mainly due to the fact that the mills had been able to sell the surplus stock to China buyers at fairly remunerative rates. The satisfactory profit realised had induced formation of two new companies and a new cotton mill—the Victoria Mill was opened in Howrah during 1890-91.³² This partial revival, however, did not lead to any large extension of trade. There was very slight increase in the number of workhands employed in cotton mills. During 1882-83 the daily average of workhands employed in the cotton mills in Howrah were only 2071 of whom 1297 were adult

28. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Howrah.

29. *Ibid.*, 24 Parganas.

30. AGAR, Presidency Division, Gen. Misc., 3-5, November 1887.

31. *Ibid.*, 1885-86, Gen. Misc. 3-4, November 1886.

32. *Ibid.*, Burdwan Division 1890-91, Gen. Misc., 1-2 October 1891.

males, 407 adult females, 271 young persons and 95 children.³³ The total number rose to only 2862 in 1888-89.³⁴

Owing to distress and low prices ruling in the Chinese market the condition of cotton trade became unfavourable in the nineties. Shipment to China had been almost entirely suspended and the production of the mills had been thrown upon the local market where there was tremendous competition. To overcome the crisis, in Howrah, the mills again had to work short hours with a view to restricting production.³⁵ The huge American crop and cheap prices of American cotton had given an advantage to mills in Europe and America over those in India. Owing to the cheapness of American cotton and also because of the low quality of Bengal crop the demand for export was small. Thus except for some temporary revival, the prospect of cotton mills had never been very promising. The owners who were well organised tried to shift the burden of the crisis on the workers by curtailment of hours of work and reduction in wages. Hard pressed by these heavy odds the workers had to resist these sinister attempts and sometimes they even resorted to strike.

33. *Ibid.*, 1882-83, Gen. Misc., 1-2, September 1883.

34. *Ibid.*, 1888-89, Gen. Misc., 1-4, August 1889.

35. *Ibid.*, 1890-91, Gen. Misc., 1-2, October 1891.

TABLE 2

Number of operatives in Cotton Mills in Hooghly, Howrah and 24 Parganas, 1898³⁶

Name and Locality of Factory	Adult		Children		Grand Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female		
<i>Hooghly</i>						
1. Bengal Spinning & Weaving Co. Ltd., Mahesh	490	52	542	40	50	592
<i>Hooghly.</i>						
1. Bowreah Cotton Mill (Old), Bowreah	935	46	981	64	1	1045½
2. Bowreah Cotton Mill (New), Bowreah	311	24½	335½	188	—	523½
3. Ghosuri Cotton Mill, Ghosuri	1105	556½	1661½	292½	36½	1990½
4. Victoria Cotton Mill, Ghosuri	288	78	366	59	20	445
5. Ram Dayal Cotton Mill	425	344	769	133	18½	920½
6. New Ring Cotton Mill, Uluberia	290	8	298	165	—	463
Total	3354	1057	4411	901½	75½	5388
<i>24 Parganas</i>						
1. Empress of India Cotton Mill, Shyampur	651	21	672	131	—	803
2. Bengal Cotton Mill, Garden Reach	1408	213	1621	236	33	1890
3. Garden Reach Cotton Mill, Garden Reach	510	53	563	92	1	656
4. Dunbar Cotton Mill, Shyamnagar	1282	173	1455	137	43	1635
Total	3851	460	4311	596	77	4984

36. ARWIFAB 1898, Gen. Misc. 30-31, August 1899.

Coal Mines. Modern methods of production had begun to be used in coal mining also and in Bengal coal mining commenced in 1820 when a mine was opened at Ranigunge under European supervision and with European capital. Encouraged by the success of this first enterprise other mines under European management were opened in quick succession. However, as demand for coal was very small, the progress was slow. The commencement of the East Indian Railway in 1854 gave an impetus to the mining industry and the growing jute mills and factories in Calcutta also created a demand for coal. New pits were opened and by 1860 50 collieries were at work in the Ranigunge field.³⁷

The largest and best mines producing the bulk of coal were owned and operated by European Companies, generally firms of managing agents, in Calcutta. Of course Indian capital, especially Bengali was also active in coal industry since its inception but the majority of India enterprises were confined only to small pits.

Average daily number of operatives employed in the coal mines of Ranigunge, 1880-81.³⁸

Name of Coal Concern	Average daily number of workers employed
1. Bengal Coal Company Ltd.	810 Surface 1350 underground
2. New Birbhum Coal Company Ltd.	701
3. Ranigunge Coal Association Ltd.	2000
4. Equitable Coal Company Ltd.	1254
5. Apcar & Co.	772
6. Shib Kristo Daw & Co.	486
7. Searsole Maharanee	817
Total	8190

The opening of Suez Cannal temporarily depressed the Indian coal industry for it facilitated cheap import of coal. So side by side with increase in the production of Indian coal, import of foreign coal was also increasing steadily. Such huge imports of foreign coal, posed a problem and the Bengal Chamber of Com-

37. *Bengal District Gazetteer, Burdwan.*

38. AGAR, Burdwan Division Gen. Misc., 3-4, August 1881.

merce made representations to the Government on this issue.³⁹ The railway freight to Howrah was so high that Ranigunge coal could hardly compete with English coal. This import of English coke and coal into the country as also the fact that East Indian Railway supplied coal to all the State railways from their own mines forced the influential coal merchants to curtail their operations and to be content with petty transactions. Another noticeable feature was cut throat competition among the large companies which resulted in low price. The companies tried to undersell each other. The competition was so hard that one of the companies (Bengal Coal Company) having larger capital was actually selling at a loss to injure other Companies.⁴⁰

To overcome the crisis the necessity for combination was felt by the mine-owners and the Indian Mining Association was formed in 1892, mainly composed of European owners. Another, the Indian Mining Federation composed largely of Indian owners was also formed. Needless to say this was much less influential than the former.

Another difficulty which the owners of collieries had to experience was inadequate supply of labour. Not only was supply inadequate, the labour available was wholly unskilled and consequently much less coal was raised than could have been if skilled men were available.

Gradual increase in coal trade and number of operatives employed⁴¹

Year	No. of Mines	Average number of workhands employed			
		Male	Female	Child	Total
1891	77	15214	7021	2599	24834
1892	76	18440	8355	2700	29495
1893	82	17578	7698	2177	27453
1894	94	19816	8538	2419	30773

At the commencement of the year 1896, 35,888 persons were working in the mines belonging to the Mining Association, of

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 1882-83, Gen. Misc., 1-3, September 1883.

41. *Ibid.*, 1893-94, Gen. Misc. 1-3, November 1894.

them 23,899 were men, 9644 women and 2345 children. The number employed below ground was 15,832 men, 4,570 women and 942 children. In the 59 mines not belonging to the Association 17,322 people in all were said to have been employed at the beginning of the year. Of them 11465 were men, 5015 women and 842 children. The number of persons employed below ground consisted of 7,893 men, 2829 women and 268 children.⁴²

Iron and Steel Industry. One peculiar feature of the industrial growth in India was, as has been already pointed out, that in spite of extension of railways and establishment of factories, the basic industries like iron and steel did not make much headway. Nevertheless some unsuccessful attempts to work iron were made during the first half of the 19th century by private enterprise. The Albion Mills were erected before 1811. In 1839 Messrs Jessop and Company, the oldest engineering firm in the country, began an experimental Iron Works near Barakar on the Ranigunge coal fields. In 1855 Messrs Mackay & Co., a Calcutta Agency House started the Birbhum Iron Works but owing to lack of charcoal it was closed in 1860. In 1875 Messrs Burn & Co., another Calcutta Agency House undertook to operate the same works but soon gave it up.⁴³

Afterwards attempts were made to smelt iron by means of coal and availability of good coking coal at Barakar led to the formation of the Bengal Iron Company in 1874 which collapsed after 5 years and the concern was bought up by the Government. That shows that in spite of great possibility the actual progress made by Iron and Steel Industry till 1881 was insignificant. At the same time the indigenous iron smelting industry which was quite widespread had been destroyed in the face of competition with British iron which found a growing market in India. In 1883 Mr. Ritter C. Von Schwartz who was in charge of Barakar Iron plant complained that the Government Department did not give him support. He maintained that the Telegraph Department among others in spite of his offer at 30 p.c. less, ordered their requirements

42. Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission (henceforth referred to as RLEC) 1896, Gen. Emigration, 16-42, December 1896.

43. *Bengal District Gazetteer, Howrah*; D. H. Buchanan, *Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India*, New York, 1934, p. 280.

from England.⁴⁴ The other large iron working firms of Messrs. Burn & Co., Mariller Edwards and Kinds & Co. in Howrah also complained of falling business. Only some petty Indian firms, some 30 in number carried on a brisk trade in agricultural implements and other articles in demand among Indians.

Later on, the industry showed some improvement. In 1889 the Government factory at Barakar was made over to a private company viz, Bengal Iron and Steel Company Ltd. which was incorporated in England. The business of the Company remained almost static.⁴⁵ Martin & Company was formed in 1892 and achieved some success in building water works, drainage system and light railways. Public expenditure on development work like building railways roads, bridges and irrigation works, telegraphs, development of docks and ports, urban sanitation and water supply created much opportunities for the engineering industry. However, the engineering industry had to face acute foreign competition from the British manufacturers, who supplied India's requirements. The Indian Government under their pressure instead of encouraging Indian firms was placing orders with the foreign companies. Jessop complained that wagons were ordered in England though Indian firms could turn over 2000 wagons a year at favourable price. The Indian Engineering Association also complained that "nothing like a fair share of the wagons required by the State Railways was given out in India."⁴⁶ To the starting of steel production in India under Indian management the environment was quite unfavourable. Most of the big engineering concerns in India were exclusively in British hands and these firms rarely employed Indians in supervising capacity. The prospectus of the Royal Indian Engineering College at Coopers Hill, a college which was maintained by the Government of India at great expense for the purpose of training engineers intended for service in India, specifically excluded Indians from entry except in special cases.⁴⁷

In the year 1898 in the whole province of Bengal there were 11 iron foundries, 9 engineering workshops, 9 railway workshops and 2 coach building factories. The factories situated in Burdwan,

44. AGAR, Burdwan Division 1883-84, Gen. Misc., 2-3, October 1884.

45. *Ibid.*, 1891-92, Gen. Misc., 4-6, December 1892; ARWIFAB 1892, Gen. Misc., 12-13, August 1893.

46. Sunil Sen, *An Economic History of Modern India*, pp. 46-47.

47. Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

TABLE 3
 Number of Operatives Employed in Iron Industries, Engineering & Railway Workshops, 1898⁴⁸

Name and Locality of Factories	Adult		Children		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1. British Engineering Department, Salke	842½	—	—	—	842½
2. Howrah Iron Works, Howrah	2648	5	150½	—	2803½
3. Civil Engineering College, Sibpur	231	—	—	—	231
4. Sibpur Iron Works, Sibpur	96	—	—	—	96
5. Ganges Engineering Works, Sibpur	182	—	—	—	182
6. East Indian Railway Engineering Workshop, Howrah	345	—	22	—	367
7. Albion Foundry, Sibpur	90½	—	—	—	90½
8. East Indian Railway Carriage & Wagon Department, Howrah	2093½	—	—	—	2093½
9. Howrah Foundry, Howrah	405	—	20	—	425
10. Victoria Engine Works, Howrah	866½	—	—	—	866½
11. Shalimar Workshop, Sibpur	480	—	—	—	480
<i>Burdwan</i>					
1. Bengal Iron & Steel Company, Barakar.	1121	247	—	—	1368

48. *Ibid.**Continued*

TABLE 3 (Contd.)

Name and Locality of Factories	Adult		Children		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
24 Parganas					
1. Vulcan Iron Works, Garden Reach	367	1	4	—	372
2. Victoria Engine Works, Garden Reach	124	1	—	—	125
3. Sikdar & Company, Maniktola Road	112	—	—	—	112
4. Locomotive & Carriage Workshop, Kanchrapara	1283	6	—	—	1289
Calcutta					
1. Phoenix Iron Works, Clive Street	700	—	—	—	700
2. Messrs. Mackintosh Burn & Company, Bentinck St.	253	—	16.5	—	269.5
3. T. E. Thomson & Company's Workshop	76.5	—	—	—	76.5
4. Stewart & Company, Old Court House Corner	225	—	4.5	—	229.5
5. Dykes & Company, Lower Circular Road	147	—	18.5	—	165.5
Total	12688.5	260	236	—	13184.5

Howrah, 24 Parganas and Calcutta gave employment to 13184.5 persons daily on an average of whom 12688.5 were adult males, 260 adult females and 236 male children.⁴⁹ It seems that the percentage of female and child labourers in iron works was far less than in textile industries. This may be explained by the fact that iron industries required a strong physique and a certain amount of skill on the part of the labourers.

Apart from these main industries some other industries also made their appearance viz, paper mills and pottery works. The Serampore Paper Mill, the first of its kind in India was not very successful and its business was transferred to the paper mill at Bally in the district of Howrah which was started by a company in 1874.⁵⁰ The Titagarh Paper Mill was brought under the scope of the Factory Act during 1884-85. A new paper mill, the Bengal Paper Mill was started at Ranigunge during 1891-92 and in 1893 the Imperial Mill at Kankinara was brought under the operation of the Factory Act.⁵¹ These 4 mills in Burdwan and 24 Parganas on the whole showed promising increase in their outturn and in the year 1898 all these mills daily employed on an average 2910 persons of whom 2385 were adult males, 411 adult females, 113 male children and only 1 female child.⁵²

The Ranigunge Pottery, the only of its kind in Bengal was conducted on a large scale on western methods. It was started in 1866 by one Mr. Macdonald and was taken over by Messrs. Burn and Company in 1869.⁵³ The works were largely expanded to produce all kinds of pottery goods. During the year 1898 the number of hands daily employed in the mill on an average was 1085, of whom 794 were male, 189 female and 102 male children.⁵⁴

Side by side with these industries there were also other smaller concerns which were placed under the provisions of the Factory Act. These included flour mills, rice mills, sugar industries, oil mills, breweries etc. The general rate of growth of these concerns

49. ARWIFAB 1898, Gen. Misc., August 1899.

50. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Hooghly.

51. AGAR, Presidency Division 1890-91, Gen. Misc. 1-2, October 1891; AGAR, Burdwan Division 1891-92, Gen. Misc., 4-6, December 1892.

52. ARWIFAB 1898, Gen. Misc., 17-31, August 1899.

53. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Burdwan.

54. ARWIFAB 1898, *Ibid*.

was of course slow. In the year 1898 the total number of factories in the whole province of Bengal was 181. The number of persons employed in all the factories daily on an average was 165027, of whom 128957 were males, 20927 females and 15143 children.⁵⁵

GROWTH (1900-1911)

Even in the early years of the 20th century the pattern of development of industries on the whole remained unaltered. One notable feature, however, of the industrial growth during the period was development of indigenous enterprise fostered by the spirit of Swadeshi. So far the greater part of the industrial development in Bengal was due to European capital and enterprise. Upper class Indians were shy of investing capital in industries. One of the major reasons for this shyness was total dominance of European capital in the field which was being sustained and pushed up by administrative, political and financial support.

The idea of Swadeshi was as old as the national consciousness itself. The nationalist press was again and again calling upon the Indian community with capital to invest in commerce and industry to make the nation economically self sufficient. Decline of Bengal's traditional handicrafts threw millions into unemployment and starvation. This caused a stir in the nationalist mind and helped the movement for Swadeshi enterprise which they hoped would not only bring prosperity to the country but would also absorb the teeming millions of distressed people. In Bengal the movement for Swadeshi may be traced back to the efforts of Nabagopal Mitra who organised the Hindu Mela in 1867 with a view to promoting the use of indigenous articles by organising exhibitions etc. Bholanath Chandra forcefully kept on propagating the idea in the pages of Mookerjee's Magazine from 1873 to 1876. Bengal National Chamber of Commerce was established in 1887 with the particular object of protecting the Indian commercial interests in Bengal and of developing commercial enterprise in the province.⁵⁶ To the far sighted nationalist leaders industrialisation was the most important if not the sole criterion

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Bengal National Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Souvenir Volume 1887-1962, Calcutta 1962.*

of progress of a people and the only way of economic development of a country.

In the movement for Swadeshi enterprise Indian newspapers played a very effective role. Demand for Swadeshi initiative was raised from the Congress platform and other recognised public associations. Mr. R. C. Dutt presiding over the Benaras Industrial Conference of 1905 said. . . . "We must change our habit of universal cottage industries and learn to form companies, erect mills, and adopt the method of combined action if we desire to foster or revive our industries."⁵⁷ Nationalist leaders laid bare also the political implication of the dominance of foreign capital over Indian economy. As Ranade observed : "Commercial and manufacturing predominance naturally transfers political ascendancy".⁵⁸ So this movement for Swadeshi enterprise may be viewed as a reflection of national aspiration of the people, their desire to take the path of independent capitalist development.

But despite nationalist aspirations the real achievement fell far short of their expectations. The Swadeshi movement inspired development in two directions—the revival of traditional handicrafts and the growth of modern industries. So far as modern industries were concerned the growth was very limited. Two important factories that were started with Indian imagination and Indian capital were the Banga Lakshmi Cotton Mills at Mahesh, Serampore and the Mohini Mills at Kushtia. The Banga Lakshmi Cotton Mills at Mahesh was set up in 1906 and took over a working concern the Lakshmi Tulsi Cotton Mills. The directors included a number of leading Bengali Zamindars and businessmen and it was patronised by top nationalist politicians. In 1908 the mill employed on an average 6026 hands daily. This was the only mill in Bengal which wove dhoties.⁵⁹ Two years later in 1908 another small enterprise the Mohini Mills was started by Mohini Mohun Chakravarty, a landholder at Kushtia (Nadia). The mills worked satisfactorily during 1910-11 and the average number of skilled and unskilled labourers employed daily during the year was re-

57. J. G. Cumming *op. cit.*, p. 49.

58. M. G. Ranade, Essays, quoted in Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*, New Delhi, 1969, pp. 106-07.

59. J. G. Cumming, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-7 ; *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Hooghly.

ported to be 97.⁶⁰ Another Cotton Mill, the Kallian Cotton Mill had been set up at Mahesh about the year 1908 and was financed and managed chiefly by Indians.⁶¹ Another Indian Cotton Mill was brought on the register during the year 1911 ; it was Ganesh Cloth Mill in Calcutta.⁶²

One very remarkable enterprise conceived in true Swadeshi spirit was Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works which Mr. Cumming described as one of the most go-ahead young enterprises in Bengal. It was started in 1893 by the great Scientist Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy. The Company made good progress. The number of workers employed there was only 70 in 1908 but rose to 190 in 1911.⁶³

Another successful indigenous enterprise was the Calcutta Pottery Works started in 1909 by the efforts of Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandi of Kasimbazar and Baikuntha Nath Sen of Berhampore. The factory succeeded in producing glaze unknown to traditional pottery in Bengal but the growing influx of cheap Japanese and German articles posed a serious problem. Another less successful concern was the Bengal Pottery Works at Baranagar under Satya Charan Bose.⁶⁴

The spirit of Swadeshi also touched certain other industries like leather and some consumer goods industries like soap factory, match factory, cigarette industries, manufacture of paper, ink etc. Three factories for the manufacture of cigarettes—the Globe Cigarette Company, the Calcutta Cigarette Company and the East India Cigarette Manufacturing Company were owned and managed entirely by Indians and these attained a fair measure of success. The last mentioned being the largest, employed about 487 workmen in 1911.⁶⁵

The Swadeshi experiment however, did not in any way change the face of Indian economy. European capital no doubt, maintained as before its predominant position in Bengal's economy.

60. Miscellaneous General Administration Report, Presidency Division 1910-11, Gen. Misc., 43-45, October 1911.

61. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Hooghly.

62. ARWIFAB 1911, Gen. Misc. 27-45, August 1912.

63. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, 24 Parganas.

64. *Ibid.*, Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-08*, New Delhi, 1973, p. 125.

65. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, 24 Parganas.

There was very little advance in the field of basic industries like engineering, iron and steel etc. Even in the early years of the 20th century machines and instruments continued to be imported from Europe and so was the case with iron and steel used in large workshops. In consequence basic industries like iron and steel could not develop sufficiently to make independent industrial growth possible. The Bengal Iron and Steel Company, one of the oldest iron works had to seek market outside India in Australia.⁶⁶ The firm produced during 1908, 48,906 tons of iron and the average number of operatives employed daily was 2,934.⁶⁷ The only notable exception was Tata Iron and Steel Company which made its appearance near the end of the period under review. Tata's attempt to raise capital at London failed but at last TISCO succeeded in securing the goodwill of the Secretary of State for India, and in 1905 the Commerce and Industry Department guaranteed to purchase from the Company 20,000 tons of steel rail annually for a period of 10 years. This railway contract and some other concessions granted by the Government gave the Company some stimulus. The works had the advantage of easy access to raw materials and was situated near the biggest market for steel in India viz, Calcutta. The TISCO was registered in Bombay in 1907. With the help of American technical personnel and German machinery the Company started production of pig iron in 1912. There was some delay in starting a plant for steel production. The TISCO exported a considerable quantity of pig iron chiefly to Japan. The Company carried out extension and earned handsome profits. The number of workers rose from 4,235 in 1910 to 16,000 in 1916.⁶⁸

During the year 1911 in the whole province of Bengal there were 12 iron foundries, 20 engineering workshops, 13 railway workshops and 3 coach building factories. The factories situated in the districts of Howrah, Burdwan, 24 Parganas and in Calcutta gave employment daily on an average to 23467 persons of whom 22727 were adult males, 569 adult females, 171 male children. A large labour force was in constant employment also at the docks in Kidderpore and Howrah. During the year 1911 there

66. Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

67. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Burdwan.

68. Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *op. cit.*, pp. 291-304; Sunil Sen, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-68.

TABLE 4

Number of Operatives Employed in Iron Industries, Engineering and Railway Workshops, 1911⁶⁹

Name of Industry	Adult		Children		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Howrah</i>					
1. British India Engineering Dept., Salkea	1252	—	—	—	1252
2. Howrah Foundry, Howrah	1490	—	—	—	1490
3. Howrah Iron Works (Burn & Co.)	4303	—	99	—	4402
4. Civil Engineering College, Sibpur	337	—	—	—	337
5. Ganges Engineering Works, Bally	250	—	—	—	250
6. East India Railway Engineering Works	109	—	—	—	109
7. Locomotive & Carriage Workshop, Kadamtala	134	—	—	—	134
8. Albion Foundry, Sibpur	120	—	—	—	120
9. Victoria Engine Works, Howrah	498	1	—	—	499
10. Shalimar Workshop	440	—	—	—	440
11. Sibpur Iron Works, Salkea	75	—	—	—	75
12. Shalimar Loco Engineering Works Sibpur	200	—	—	—	200
13. Andul Engineering Works	143	—	—	—	143
14. Port Engineering Works, Nazirgunge	115	—	—	—	115
15. East Indian Railway Carriage & Wagon Department, Liluah	4572	—	—	—	4572

69. *Ibid.**Continued*

1	2	3	4	5	6
Calcutta					
1. Messrs. Mackintosh Burn and Company's Workshop, Bentinck Street	480	—	—	—	480
2. Messrs. T. E. Thomson and Company's Engineering Workshop, Esplanade East	120	—	—	—	120
3. W. Leslie and Company's Workshop, Dharamtala Street	214	—	—	—	214
4. Messrs. T. E. Thomson and Company's Engineering Workshop, Dharamtala Street	51	—	—	—	51
5. The French Motor Car Company's Workshop, Ripon Street	245	—	—	—	245
6. Messrs. Stewart and Company's Coach Building, Mangoe Lane	265	—	—	—	265
7. Messrs. Dykiss & Company's Carriage Works, Lower Circular Road	200	—	20	—	220
Burdwan					
1. Bengal Iron & Steel Works, Kendua	2998	564	20	—	3582
24 Parganas					
1. Vulcan Iron Works, Lower Circular Road	442	—	—	—	442
2. Sikdar & Company's Iron Foundry	88	—	—	—	88
3. Bengal Engineering Works	60	—	—	—	60

Continued

1	2	3	4	5	6
24 Parganas					
4. Jessop & Company's Iron Works or Phoenix Iron Works	333	—	7	—	340
5. Saxby and Farmers' Factory	250	—	10	—	260
6. Hooghly Docking & Engineering Company	60	—	—	—	60
7. Albert Iron Works	60	—	—	—	60
8. Victoria Engine Works, Garden Reach	167	—	—	—	167
9. Inceell and Silk Mill	150	—	—	—	150
10. Russa Engineering Works	140	—	—	—	140
11. East Bengal Engineering Works	55	—	—	—	55
12. Civil and Sanitary Engineering Company	45	—	—	—	45
13. Loco and Carriage Works, Kanchrapara	2154	4	—	—	2158
14. Coach Building Works	112	—	15	—	127
Total	22727	569	171	—	23467

were altogether 9 dockyards in Bengal—4 in 24 Parganas and 5 in Howrah. The Caledonian Dock in Howrah remained closed during the year. The remaining 8 gave employment daily on average to 6318 persons, of them 6228 adult males and 90 male children.⁷⁰

Coal Mines. The coal mining industry of Bengal made some progress owing to the growth of factory industries and extension of railways and steamships. In 1901 the number of mines in Bengal rose to 292 which produced 5,703,876 tons of coal and employed 79,652 workers. Out of these Ranigunge coalfields gave employment to 41,196 workers, whereas Jharia gave employment to 27,346 workers.⁷¹ Of the total amount of coal produced, European owned collieries produced 4,252,093 tons and Indian owned collieries only 1,451,783 tons.⁷² That makes it obvious that despite Indian capital investment in the field, European capital and European management continued to dominate the scene. The colonial factor told heavily upon the coal mining industry as well. It appears that the import of English coal into Bombay had increased from 11,492 to 59,747 tons. The freights from England had been exceptionally low. As a result, though on the whole coal industry remained active, it had to face periodic crises.

Indian mining industry had to face also the problem of short supply of labour. Although demand for labour in Indian mining districts far exceeded supply, Indians were, surprisingly enough, drifting to South African mines in increasing numbers. During 1905, 2,207 Indians were employed in and about Natal coal mines.⁷³ What prompted Indians to cross the sea was apparently the inducement of higher pay, shorter hours of work and better housing.

The coal industry recovered from slackness and a great boom in the industry was marked in 1907 when a number of new mines were opened. The Jharia coalfield was expanded.⁷⁴ The number of coal mines in Bengal during the year 1911 was 422 where on

70. ARWIFAB 1911, Gen. Misc., 27-62, August 1912.

71. *Report of Chief Inspector of Mines in India* (henceforth referred to as RCIMI) 1901.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*, 1906.

74. *Ibid.*, 1907-08.

an average 99,983 persons were employed below ground and only 35,406 above ground. Female labour was largely employed in the coal mines of Bengal, their number being 35,078 both below and above ground.⁷⁵

Textile Industry : Jute. Jute still remained the predominant industry of Bengal and as earlier was mainly financed and managed by Europeans. The industry gave India its near monopoly in world trade. While good profits were made there were frequent crises of over-production followed by long lean years, the main problem being maintaining an equilibrium between supply and world demand for jute goods. To cope with this problem successive working time agreements had been made mainly on the initiative of the IJMA. On the whole jute industry continued to be remunerative. The steady growth in jute trade was maintained for years and in 1905 there was a larger increase in jute industry than in any previous year and some new mills with a number of looms made their appearance in Presidency and Burdwan Division.⁷⁶ During the year 1910-11 in the province of Bengal there were 60 jute mills spread over the districts of 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly where a labour force of 1,96,087 were daily employed, of whom on an average 141,365 were adult males, 31,951 adult females, 18,990 male children and 3,781 female children. During the same period there were 31 jute presses in 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly and Calcutta providing employment to 12,442 persons daily on an average of whom 11,124 were adult males, 1,298 adult females and only 12 male children and 8 female children.⁷⁷

75. *Ibid.*, 1911.

76. From 1895 onwards the jute industry enjoyed prosperity and in boom years like 1906 and 1907 the rate of dividends on ordinary shares went up to 25% and for some good companies like Andrew Yule and Company (Budge Budge), Kettle Well Bullen (Fort Gloster), Bird and Company (Standard and Union Jute Mill) average rate of dividend exceeded 12% from 1901-1910—Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

77. ARWIFAB 1911, Gen. Misc., 27-62, August 1912.

*Average Number of Operatives Daily Employed in Jute Mills
and Jute Presses, 1911⁷⁸*

Name of District	Number of Mills	Adult		Children		Total
		Male	Female	Male	Female	
<i>Jute Mills</i>						
24 Parganas	39	86737	20181	12081	2758	121757
Howrah	13	33019	6132	4379	425	43955
Hooghly	8	21609	5638	2530	598	30375
Total	60	141365	31951	18990	3781	196087
<i>Jute Presses</i>						
24 Parganas	19	7823	916	12	8	8759
Calcutta	3	1001	85	—	—	1086
Howrah	8	2265	282	—	—	2547
Hooghly	1	35	15	—	—	50
Total	31	11124	1298	12	8	12442

Cotton. There was no noticeable improvement in the cotton industry of Bengal, the prospect of which was never very bright. At the turn of the century majority of the mills had stopped work while the rest worked only partially. Faced with competition from cheap machine-made Manchester goods and to some extent from the Bombay mill products, the Bengal mills had to depend on China as an outlet for their surplus production more than ever before. However, because of competition from Japan and Shanghai mills a remunerative business with China ports had also become quite impossible. The position was made worse by the outbreak of rebellion in North China in June 1901.⁷⁹ Another factor which adversely affected the cotton trade was the high price of cotton which was heavily exported to feed the machinery in Lancashire and Manchester consequent upon the failure of crops in America. The natural consequence was that mills were obliged to work short time to avoid running into stock.⁸⁰ There was some temporary revival in 1905 leading to addition of a few more and some expansion of the existing mills. The growth of Swadeshi

78. *Ibid.*

79. AGAR, Presidency Division, Gen. Misc., 15-19, November 1901.

80. Miscellaneous Annual Report; Presidency Division, Gen. Misc., 24-26, October 1904.

movement also gave some impetus to cotton industry as has been already mentioned. These developments notwithstanding there was no marked improvement in the overall prospect of cotton industry in Bengal. During the year 1910-11 in the province of Bengal there were altogether 18 cotton mills including 2 ginning factories. These 18 mills excluding 1 in Chittagong gave employment daily on an average to 10,802 persons of whom 7748 were adult males, 1502 adult females, 1424 male children and 128 female children, women and children comprising a large number as in jute mills of Bengal.⁸¹

*Average number of operatives daily employed in
Cotton Mills, 1911⁸²*

Name of District	Number of Mills	Adult		Children		Total
		Male	Female	Male	Female	
24 Parganas	6	3268	448	441	48	4205
Calcutta	1	95	10	13	—	118
Hooghly	2	736	192	31	17	976
Howrah	7	3592	852	933	63	5440
Nadia	1	57		6	—	63
Total	17	7748	1502	1424	128	10,802

Paper and Pottery. The Titagarh Paper Mill and the Bengal Paper Mill at Ranigunge were the two important paper mills at the turn of the century which were managed by the Managing Agency firms of F. W. Heilgers and Company and the Balmer Lawrie and Company respectively. In 1905 the Bally Paper Mill, the first paper mill in Bengal went into liquidation. The Kankinara Paper Mill in 24 Parganas also passed into the hands of the Titagarh Paper Mill Company Limited and came to be known as Titagarh Paper Mill No. 2.⁸³ The paper industry too, was threatened by competition from European paper which was manufactured from cheap woodpulp. The two companies mentioned

81. ARWIFAB 1911, Gen. Misc., 27-62, August 1912.

82. *Ibid.*

83. Miscellaneous Annual Report, Burdwan Division, 1902-04, Gen. Misc. 39-41, November 1903 ; 10-14, October 1904.

above by forming into the Indian Paper Makers' Association could effectively achieve co-operation and co-ordination of their policies. This explains at least partially their survival in the face of foreign competition. In 1911 the Titagarh Paper Mill No. 1 employed 1423 hands ; No. 2 employed 1256 and Bengal Paper Mill 666 hands daily on an average.⁸⁴

The Pottery works run by Burn and Co. at Ranigunge continued to be a flourishing concern which manufactured glazed drain pipes, bricks, tiles, and every variety of pottery. In 1911 the number of work people employed in the factory averaged 1085, of them 794 were adult males, 189 females and 102 male children.⁸⁵

During 1901 in the entire province of Bengal the number of factories actually at work were 242 and the average daily number of operatives employed were 2,00,019.⁸⁶ At the close of the year 1911 the number of factories in the whole region of Bengal (including Eastern Bengal and Assam) amounted to 320 where the total average number of operatives daily employed were 3,03,983.⁸⁷ Most of these factories belonged to private ownership. The government itself owned very few factories. Of such 5 important factories 4 supplied the army with arms, ammunition and clothing. These were (1) the Gun and Shell Factory at Cossipore, (2) The Ammunition Factory at Dum Dum, (3) The Rifle Factory at Ichapore, (4) The Army Clothing Factory at Alipore. These 4 factories gave employment to 1271, 2681, 2050 and 380 hands respectively in 1911. The fifth important industrial concern under government management was the Telegraph Workshop at Alipore which afforded employment to 639 men in 1911.⁸⁸

84. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, 24 Parganas ; ARWIFAB 1911, Gen. Misc., 27-62, August 1912.

85. ARWIFAB 1911, Gen. Misc., 27-62, August 1912.

86. *Ibid.*, 1901, Gen. Misc., 14-16, August 1902.

87. *Ibid.*, 1911, Gen. Misc., 27-62, August 1912. In the then Bengal province excluding Eastern Bengal and Assam the number of factories amounted to 258.

88. *Bengal District Gazetteer*, 24 Paraganas.

TABLE 5

Average Daily Number of Operatives Employed in the Factories (Within the Scope of the Factory Act) in Bengal, 1911.⁸⁹

Adult	Calcutta	Burdwan	Hooghly	Howrah	24 Parganas	Total for the year 1911	Total in the Province of Bengal
Male	8,522	4,917	22,754	56,095	1,25,008	2,17,296	
Female	120	1,141	5,885	7,402	22,363	36,911	
Total	8,642	6,058	28,639	63,497	1,47,371	2,54,207	
Children							
Male	163	101	2,575	5,484	13,389	21,712	
Female			617	490	2,843	3,950	
Total	163	101	3,192	5,974	16,232	25,662	
Total Average Daily Number	8,805	6,159	31,831	69,471	1,63,603	2,79,869	3,03,983

89. ARWIFAB 1911, Gen. Misc., 27-62, August 1912.

The above survey makes it clear that because of colonial character of India's economic development the industrial growth was very slow and doomed to be lopsided. Compared to the vast population of the country the number of workers engaged in organised industries was very small indeed. During the year 1911 out of a population of 46,305,642 in the province of Bengal the total labour force engaged in industrial and manufacturing concerns were only 606,305, two thirds of them being unskilled labour.⁹⁰ Villages largely remained unaffected by the change, yet these villages were the main source of labour supply.

To conclude, considering the vast population of the country, the working class was insignificant in number, only a drop in the ocean. Nevertheless, speaking historically, the birth of this new class, 'a class', in the words of Karl Marx, 'always increasing in numbers and disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist production itself'⁹¹ was an event of great significance. It may be argued that in the period under review the working class in India was so small, so ill developed, so heterogeneous in character that it could not be said to fit into the description given by Marx. It is my endeavour to show in the following pages that while it is wrong to overdraw the picture it will be equally wrong to ignore the fact that the working class with all its imperfections so peculiar to colonial order was already emerging as a new category of working men and as a distinctly new class in society.

90. *Report on the Census of India 1911*. Vol V, Part I, Ch. XII.

91. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol I, Moscow, 1954, p. 763.

2

THE CONDITION OF THE WORKING CLASS

The Working Class is a class of workers who under the capitalist system are deprived of the means of production and are forced to sell their labour power to earn a living. The basis of capitalist production is the exploitation of wage labour. "Without wage labour", Marx wrote, "there is no production of surplus value . . . , without production of surplus value there is no capitalist production and hence no capital and no capitalist".¹

In order to earn fabulous profits the capitalists resorted to certain well-known devices. They achieved their object first and foremost by lengthening the working day. Secondly, by reducing wages to the subsistence level. The introduction of machinery into production was accompanied by a systematic reduction in the wages of millions of workers. The machine reduced the demand for skilled labour and hence its price. Thirdly, by employment of women and children in large numbers. Women, teen-agers and children became an important population group supplying new members of the working class in the early phase of capitalist production. It was very profitable for the entrepreneurs to hire women and children for work in the factories because having no vocational training at all they offered their services at a cheap rate. Moreover they were more obedient and less capable of resistance. These were general laws, so to say, applicable to all countries wherever the factory system came to stay. And India naturally was no exception.

THE FORMATIVE PERIOD

One inevitable product of the factory industry, however lopsided it might be, was the factory workers, the industrial proletariat, who came to live by selling their labour power to others. This gave rise to a distinctly new type of wage slavery and the worst form of exploitation of labour.

1. Karl Marx, quoted in *The International Working Class Movement*, Vol I, Moscow 1980, p. 42.

Now, which section of the population did these early factory workers come from? To answer this question we have first of all to consider the peculiarity of the Indian situation. In England, that classical land of industrial development, Industrial Revolution marked a higher stage of industrial growth. With the invention of machine in England the cottage and home made industries and the manufactories were being transformed into large-scale machine industries. In India the situation was totally different. Once Industrial Revolution was effected in England India was turned in the interest of the British manufacturing class into its 'agrarian appendage'. Traditional cottage industries of India were completely destroyed while Indian markets were inundated with cheap machine-made cotton goods produced in English factories. Thus Indian weavers famed for their skill through centuries were robbed of their means of livelihood and British steam and science uprooted over the whole surface of Hindusthan the union between agriculture and cottage industry. 'This loss of the old world with no gain of a new one' consequently led to extreme impoverishment of the people of this vast country.²

2. Marx-Engels. *On Colonialism*, p. 37.

De-industrialisation of India under British rule in the interest of Manchester and Lancashire textile industry so vividly brought out by early nationalist leaders like Naoroji, R. C. Dutt, Ranade etc. and upheld by generations of Indian historians has been challenged by Morris D Morris who deprecates the notions that cotton weaving was highly developed in India before the coming of the British and that it was destroyed by Manchester machine-made textile by the middle of the 19th Century.—Morris D Morris, 'Towards a Reinterpretation of the Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History'—*Journal of Economic History*, Vol XXIII, No. 4, December 1963, pp. 606-18.

However Morris' contention has been substantially refuted by a number of scholars working on Indian economic history, viz, Tapan Roy Chowdhury, Bipan Chandra, Taru Matsui and also by Amiya Kumar Bagchi—*Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol 5, No. 1, March 1968.

An apologist for colonialism, Morris even makes an attempt to ignore or write out totally the role of colonialism in the economic stagnation of India under British rule. In his view it was not British policy but "internal dynamics" of a 'complex society' like India which was responsible for such limited growth in her economy. It was the Indian system, he asserts, which was not able to respond effectively to foreign competition based on novel technology,

The millions of ruined artisans and craftsmen, spinners, weavers, potters, smelters, smiths alike from the towns and the villages had no alternative but to crowd into agriculture leading to deadly over-pressure on land. The case of the weavers deserves special mention. It is observed in a Government report. "there are extreme cases of poverty among them, such as that of weavers, seldom to be met with among other classes. The only help for these people is to seek work in factories either in place of or to supplement their home manufactures. . . ."³

The first generation of factory workers, it appears, came from this distressed and dispossessed section of the village people. In the words of Buchanan. . . . "the factory working group surely comes from the hungry half of the agricultural population, indeed almost wholly from the hungriest quarter or eighth of it."⁴ We have evidence, no matter how small, which corroborates this observation. Most of the factory workers appearing before the Indian Factory Commission 1890, who came from Jute, Cotton, Bone and Paper mills, Sugar works, Gun and Shell Factory etc. belonged to the lower castes like *Bagdi*, *Teli*, *Mochi*, *Kaibarta*, *Bairagi*, *Sankari* etc and also to the caste of *Tanti* or weavers who were totally robbed of their hereditary means of livelihood. The factory workers included also a considerable number of distressed Muslims. The evidence further indicates that most of the adult female operatives were widows, a fact that affirmed that unless Bengali women lost their husbands who used to support them they did not come to work in the mills.⁵

In Bengal coal mines the largest single group were the *Bauris* of very low social rank, the majority of them being under-ryots or landless labourers. The next largest group in coal mining were

Morris D Morris, 'The Growth of Large Scale Industry to 1947', *The Cambridge Economic History of India 1757-1970*, Vol II, Orient Longman, 1984, pp. 553-676.

Thus Morris refuses to acknowledge the very essence of a colonial economy.

3. *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal*, 1888.

It is stated, for example, that two out of three weaver families of Noapara had sent two of their members to work in a jute factory.

4. D. H. Buchanan, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-18.

5. RIFC 1890. Evidences.

the *Santhals*, a primitive tribe who were crude agriculturists. The remaining section of the miners were recruited from similar groups and also from displaced labourers and menials from villages.⁶ Among the immigrant labourers in the coalfields we find such castes as *Pasis*, *Lodhs*, *Kumirs*, *Ahirs*, *Koeris*, *Chamars* and also lower caste Muslims.⁷

The emergence of the industrial labour force in Bengal is marked by one interesting feature, viz, the gradual replacement of Bengali workers by workers from up country, mainly from Bihar and U.P. and also from Orissa. Almost all the available sources agree on this point that by 1895/96 in nearly all the mills of Bengal, except a very few, local Bengali operatives were being supplanted by immigrant workmen mainly from Bihar, U.P. and Orissa. In course of time Bilaspuris and Madrasis were also to be found in Bengal factories. From a survey of the work-force in Shyamnagar Jute Mill and Dunbar Cotton Mill, the Labour Enquiry Commission of 1896 found non-Bengali work people constituting the majority in both the mills. In the mills around Calcutta out of the 70,000 work people employed about 35,000 to 40,000 work people were from NWP and Bihar.⁸ In his Report on Labour in Bengal (1906), Foley observed about Bengal Jute Mills in particular, 'twenty years ago all the hands were Bengalis. These have generally been replaced by Hindusthanis from U.P. and Bihar. . . . At present in most of the mills $\frac{2}{3}$ of the hands are composed of up-country men. From an estimate made by the President, Indian Jute Mills Association on the basis of 18,000 workers, it appears that local labour comprised 22 p.c.

6. RLEC 1896, Gen. Emigration, 16-42, December 1896; D. H. Buchanan *op. cit.*, pp. 296-97.

7. RLEC 1896.

In England the first generation of the factory work-force consisted really of the 'dregs of all classes. . . .'. The early factory workers were necessarily recruited from the less stable and less responsible elements in the population—displaced agricultural workers, discharged soldiers, broken tailors and cobblers, paupers and vagrants all tried their hands in the new factories and left when the discipline grew irksome. The situation was no different in other countries where the capitalist mode of production had taken shape.—Jurgen Kuczynski, *The Rise of Working Class*, pp. 67-70.

8. RLEC 1896.

and immigrant labour 78 p.c. Hindu labourers constituted 68 p.c. and Muslim labourers 32 p.c. The immigrants mainly came from Cuttack, Monghyr, Patna, Arrah, Chapra, Ghazipur etc.⁹

Foley's Report bears testimony to a fact which was not peculiar to jute mills alone but it formed a general trend. In cotton mills visited there were very few local men and the operatives belonged to the same districts of Bihar and U.P., a considerable number being from Orissa and some even from Jabbalpur. There were very few local men in Paper mills at Ranigunge, Titagarh and also at Pottery works run by Burn and Co., where half the work-force came from Monghyr, Gaya, Bhagalpur and Patna. At the docks labour mostly came from Mirzapur, Balia and adjoining districts of U.P. Bengal Nagpur Railway Workshop at Kharagpur drew labour from as far as Bombay, Gujarat, Pratapgarh, Allahabad, Sultanpur, Nagpur and even Punjab. Moreover, there was a large number of Telegus among the work people. Of course, there were a few exceptions where local Bengali workers predominated viz., at Budge Budge and Fort Gloster Jute Mills, Clive Jute Mill and Bowreah Cotton Mill.¹⁰

The Census Report of 1911 indicated that preponderance of male members was more marked in Bengal than in Bihar and Orissa because of the existence of more industrial centres in Bengal with a population largely composed of immigrants working in the mills and factories who left their wives at home. It was further stated in the Report that the mill towns along the banks of Hooghly showed a most extra ordinary growth of population which was accounted for by the influx of labourers. . . . The character of the population had changed so greatly owing to this influx that some mill towns were now practically 'foreign' towns planted in the midst of Bengal. In Bhatpara 4 persons spoke Hindi to each person speaking Bengali, in Titagarh 75 p.c. spoke Hindi, 8 p.c. Telegu and 4 p.c. Oriya while 11 p.c. only spoke Bengali. As against this it was disclosed that in Bihar and Orissa emigra-

9. Foley's *Report on Labour in Bengal*, 1906. p. 14, also Appendix IX-X. On the basis of a census taken in 1902 and 1916 by the Managing Agents of 4 Mills in Gurdulia, Bhadreswar and Titagarh it appears that while in 1902, 28 p.c. of the workers were Bengali the percentage came down to 10 only in 1916. *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission 1916-18*, Calcutta 1918, p. 14.

10. Foley's *Report on Labour in Bengal*, 1906, Appendix.

tion, i.e. exodus of the district-born in search of more remunerative employment outside was becoming an annual occurrence and the number of emigrants had risen rapidly.¹¹ Foley's Report and other sources make it evident that before 1890 the majority of the workers engaged in different factories were Bengalis with a number of immigrant non local workers coming particularly from Bihar, Orissa and U.P. Out of the 25 witnesses examined by the Factory Commission of 1890, 17 came from Calcutta and neighbouring districts. In his evidence before the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908 Imaman Imanisher, a *sirdar* in the weaving department of the Kankinara Jute Mill stated that before electric light was introduced many of the local Bengali men came to work.¹²

So a definite change was taking place in the composition of work force in Bengal. Various arguments have been put forward to explain this phenomenon. According to one view, Bengal being a fertile province there was a large demand for agricultural labourers and agricultural wages here were relatively attractive and as such Bengalis were reluctant to undergo the hardships of factory work. On the other hand the up country men belonging to Bihar, U.P. and NWP were far more distressed. Having no such prospect in agriculture they had no other alternative than to accept factory work. Being inhabitants of distressed regions, very often visited by famine, their standard of living was much lower and as such they were ready to work on lower wages than the Bengali workers.¹³ Another argument was highlighted by Dr. Nair in his Minute of Dissent to the Report of the Indian Factory Commission 1908 and this was corroborated by Kazi Zahiruddin Ahmad, President of the Mohammedan Association, Kankinara. They were of the opinion that Bengali workers being constitutionally weak could not withstand the excessively long hours of arduous work in the factories. It was pointed out that before the introduction of electric light many local Bengalis came to work in factories but as the working hours increased with the introduc-

11. *Report on the Census of India 1911*, Vol V, Part I, p. 79.

12. Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India; Sources of Supply'; *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol XIII, No. 3, July-September 1976.

13. G. M. Broughton, *Labour in Indian Industries*, Oxford University Press, 1924 pp. 73-74; Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *op.cit.*, pp. 135-36.

tion of electricity, Bengalis came to be replaced by up countrymen who were sturdy and hard working.¹⁴

Explaining the reason why the mill authorities preferred up countrymen to local Bengali workers it has been argued that the up countrymen were well content with their working conditions and more submissive than the Bengalis. Perhaps there is some truth in this line of argument. Bengali workers coming from the peasant stock had a tradition of protest and combination. Bengal had witnessed powerful peasant agitations like Indigo rebellion (1860), Pabna rising (1873) etc. and Bengali peasants had exhibited a certain degree of consciousness. It may be reasonably assumed that this tradition had some impact on the behaviour of Bengali workers who were more prone to combine and protest against injustice and exploitation. This may be the reason why the mills where the Bengali operatives were in majority such as Fort Gloster Jute Mill, Budge Budge Jute Mill, Bowreah Cotton Mill were scenes of frequent labour troubles and disturbances.¹⁵

In view of severest economic pressure it may be assumed that 'push' from the villages was a more crucial factor than the 'pull' of the factory towns though both factors were of course inter-related.¹⁶ Indian Industrial Commission 1916, expressed the same opinion in its report, 'we have little doubt but that the long hours passed in the uncongenial if not unhealthy surroundings of a factory from which the labour returns at night to a dirty crowded insanitary hovel where his only relaxations are found in the liquor shop and the bazar, are most unattractive to a man accustomed to rural life and it is only congestion existing in his native district and the desire to earn higher wages for a time that lead him to

14. *Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1908* (henceforth referred to as RIFLC 1908).

15. For details of labour troubles in above mentioned mills see Chapters III, IV.

16. In view of extremely bad living and working conditions in the factory towns Myers apprehended that there was reverse 'push' from the city which kept many industrial workers in a "partially committed state" which persisted for a long time. And this explains according to him the rate of absenteeism which was much higher in India than in more advanced industrial countries.—C. A. Myers, *Labour Problems in the Industrialisation of India*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1958, p. 53.

submit to such conditions.¹⁷ Seen in this perspective Morris does not seem to be right when he says that it was 'opportunity cost calculus' which operated behind the migratory process.¹⁸ For in that case not only the most distressed section but other sections who were economically less distressed would also have been lured to factory work to improve their lot.

In view of wholesale rural distress and also over-pressure on land, the complaint about inadequate labour supply occasionally made by the employers appears intriguing. Investigations reveal that the problem of labour supply was never so serious as to hamper normal functioning of industries. Foley's *Report on Labour in Bengal* (1906) focussed this specific problem of labour supply in organised industries and it clearly mentioned that on the whole in Bengal deficiency was not so acute. According to the report the only industry that suffered for want of labour was the tea industry. In most of the mills visited labour supply was adequate throughout the year except for a few months in the hot season. The reason for this seasonal shortage was that majority of the workers being immigrant, returned to their native villages during this season for the purpose of cultivation or to attend social occasions like weddings etc. At any rate, even this seasonal shortage, it was found, was not universal and serious enough.¹⁹ Though there was no serious dearth of unskilled labour, there was of course some difficulties in obtaining skilled labour. An overwhelming majority of the workers coming as they did from peasant stock without any knowledge or experience, naturally lacked skill in manufacturing work. Foley in his report referred to this problem especially in Engineering, Iron Works etc. where some amount of skill was essential.

When discussing the question of labour supply in organised industries due importance should be given to the role of the jobber or *sirdar*. In most of the important industrial concerns the managerial function being performed by the Europeans there was some sort of communication gap between the employers and the labourers. The absence of free labour market also added to this

17. *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission 1916-18.*

18. Morris D Morris, 'The Growth of Large Scale Industry to 1947', *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol II, pp. 655.

19. Foley's *Report on Labour in Bengal*, 1906, Ch. III.

problem. So the task of recruiting labour was entrusted to these jobbers or *sirdars*. To further their own interest it is quite possible that they sometimes manipulated situations to create some artificial scarcity. On the other hand their practice of extorting money from the prospective job seekers sometimes scared the labourers away. Of this role of the jobbers some revealing glimpses may be had from the evidence of Kazi Zahiruddin Ahmad of Kankinara Jute Mill, President Mohammedan Association before the Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908. He stated 'It was perfectly true that the *sirdars* made the hands leave in order to change them about and allow new hands to obtain *dasturi*. . . . The mills in which the exactions of *babu* and *sirdars* are kept down always command the most plentiful supply of labour'.²⁰

A very common observation about Indian labour is that he seldom becomes entirely divorced from agriculture. The Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908, stated in its report 'Indian factory operative is primarily an agriculturist or labourer in land. . . . His home is in village from where he comes, not in the city in which he labours and as such there is as yet no factory population such as exists in European countries. . . . whenever factory life becomes irksome the operative can return to his village where there is probably always work of some kind for him'.²¹

The Indian working class no doubt betrayed this habit of going back to their native villages which they did to have some respite from the unwholesome surroundings of the factories and their dwellings but to depict them primarily as agriculturists and to conclude that no factory population as such had emerged, is in our estimate an over simplification of a complex phenomenon.

It was the contention of some mill managers that since all the mill operatives were peasant proprietors who had little plots of land in their own village they left the mill from time to time to cultivate and look after their land. Dr. Nair disputed it in his Minute of Dissent saying that only about 20 p.c. of the total number of mill operatives in India might own land themselves and the remaining 80 p.c. had none. If they periodically left mill work to go to cultivate land they did so as agricultural labourers who

20. RIFLC 1908. Evidences.

21. *Ibid.*, Report.

were paid less than mill labourers. He further refuted the argument that most of the mill hands saved enough money in course of a few years to go back to their village home and live on their savings. Against this picture of happy termination of Indian labourer's life he highlighted their extreme poverty and indebtedness. In his view it was physical breakdown due to extreme hardship in mill work which compelled them to retire early.²² It is quite plausible that Indian factory labour coming from simple village surroundings found it extremely difficult to adjust to the strict discipline of factory work involving long hours of strenuous work in insalubrious surroundings. Naturally he pined for escape from this atmosphere which he could enjoy by occasional visits to his village home. It needs to be emphasized here that Indian labourers' connection with their village home did not in any way improve their material position. Our sources are adequate enough to convince us that only the most destitute, the most expropriated sections chose factory life for no other reason than that factory work was the only alternative to 'slow starvation'. This phenomenon of Indian labourer's connection with his village home is related to the factor of India's insufficient industrialisation. The pace of industrialisation being very slow India continued to remain predominantly an agricultural country with teeming millions of her population depending on agriculture. A large number of workers were only temporarily appointed on daily wage and very often were laid off and found themselves without any job. Their only alternative was to return to their village home. 'For part of the year they go back to the land where they form a section of what are called latent unemployed.'²³

Another accusation very commonly made against the Indian working class is their dilatory work behaviour, irregularity of attendance and taking frequent intervals of leave. This has been attributed to the Indian worker's habitual tendency to shirk work. This attitude may however be explained on the other hand as a reaction to the extreme hardship and monotony of their working condition. The Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908 observed that there was some casual connection between excessively long hours of work in Cotton Textile Factory and the

22. *Ibid.*, Dr. Nair's Minute of Dissent.

23. Jurgens Kuczynski, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

extent of loitering by the operatives.²⁴ In the opinion of Royal Commission on Labour 1931 "unauthorised intervals are a form of self-defence against over-work".²⁵

Such dilatory behaviour and irregular habits were not peculiar to Indian labourers alone. British employers constantly complained about laziness of labour and met it with draconian labour discipline. About British workers we are told that the factory worker of the early period was completely unprepared for his work not accustomed to work, to companies or to discipline In all the factories a subtly devised punishment system was introduced, penalties were imposed for talking during working hours for smoking, laughing etc. . . .²⁶

A point to emphasize is that despite absenteeism rate of turn-over on the whole was low because Indian worker had the desire to keep his job. Our sources are too meagre to lead us to any definite conclusion in this regard. We can only make some assumption on the basis of evidences given before the Factory Commission of 1890. Out of 25 witnesses examined one was working in Baranagar Jute Mill for 20 years, one in Union Jute Mill for 19 and another in Budge Budge Jute Mill for 18/19 years. One operative in Bengal Cotton Mill was in service for 10/15 years, another in Empress of India Cotton Mill for 10 years. A worker from Orissa was serving in Bowreah Cotton Mill for 11 years and we find a Muslim worker in Central Jute Mill working for 12 years.²⁷ Imaman Imanisher, a *sirdar* in the weaving department of the Kankinara Jute Mill, in his evidence before the Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908 stated that he had been working for 26 years in the mill.²⁸

So the fact that even as early as 1890 some of the labourers were serving their respective mills for long period like 10 to 20 years goes against the contention that labour turn over was a common phenomenon among the Indian workers and it shows that an industrial working class was in the process of formation.

24. RIFLC 1908, Vol I.

25. Quoted in Margaret Reid, *Indian Peasant Uprooted*, London, 1931, p. 33.

26. Jorgen Kuczynski, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

27. RIFC 1890. Evidences.

28. RIFLC 1908 Vol II, Evidences, Witness No. 182.

THE WORKER AND HIS EMPLOYERS

Hours of work. In India under colonial rule exploitation of labour was all the more intense. One of the worst aspects of this ruthless exploitation of labour power was excessively long hours of work leading to a condition almost inhuman and unbearable. The condition prevailing in two most representative industries—jute and cotton would give us a picture of the plight of the workers in this regard.

At the early stage there was no limit to the length of the hours of work and the factories usually worked full day-light hours extending to 13, 14 or sometime 15 hours on summer days. As the Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908 admitted, working these 'natural hours' meant maximum utilisation of labour power.²⁹ Surprisingly enough even after the introduction of the Factory Act in 1881 till 1911 it was not considered necessary to put any limit to the working hours of adult male labourers who comprised the bulk of the labour force. Even very minor restrictions placed on the working of the women and children were more often than not violated. The Secretary, Bengal Chamber of Commerce, Mr. H.W.I. Wood himself admitted that in hot weather months work was continued for 14 hours.³⁰ Babu Raj Kumar Sarbadhikary, Secretary, British Indian Association also observed that the usual time for labour was from sunrise till sunset.³¹

With the introduction of electric light by the year 1890 working hours in mills were extended to 8 or 9 p.m. Mr. C.A. Walsh, Special Inspector of Factories expressed his apprehension that 'once the electric light has been introduced in a mill there is no telling to what extent the Act will be and is at present being abused'. He further maintained that since the light was introduced into the Howrah, Sibpur and Ganges Mills, these mills had been working till 8.30 or 9 O'Clock at night or nearly 16 hours . . .³² Some mills continued to work 22 hours daily e.g. Hastings Mill.³³

29. RIFLC 1908, Vol I.

30. Gen. Misc., 25, May 1883.

31. Gen. Misc., 23, September 1892.

32. Gen. Misc., 5-17, November 1895.

33. Gen. Misc., 18, September 1895. The question of long hours of working day and night under electric light in the jute manufacturing.

In Bengal all jute mills, except a very few, normally worked from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. without a break. In some cases where the practice of cribbing time was followed a factory might run from 4.30 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. and even to 9 p.m. All the weavers had to be present at the opening and closing of the mills and they were therefore ordinarily on duty for 15 hours a day and where time cribbing was resorted to it might extend to 16 hours. The Commission found the weavers unable to stand such long hours without taking frequent spells of leave for at least 3 months a year. In the evidence before the Factory Labour Commission, Abdul Razak Taz Mohammad, a weaver of Kankinara Mill stated that they had to work from 4 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. and this was reiterated by some other weavers of Budge Budge Jute Mill.³⁴ In the opinion of the Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908 'a system which renders it possible to keep the operatives in or about the mill 14½ hours and actually at work for 13½ hours during the hottest period of the year and which precludes them from enjoying a single hour of daylight at home throughout the year except on prescribed holidays stands self condemned.'³⁵

Attempts were often made by the management to justify such excessively long hours on the ground that shift system was prevalent in most of the jute mills. However, there is enough evidence to show and it was also admitted in official quarters that the shift system was nothing but a device to make the operatives work more than the stipulated hours and the complications involved in the system made it very difficult for the inspectors to calculate the actual hours of work.³⁶

industry of India giving employment to nearly 1,00,000 persons was raised by Sir John Leng in the House of Commons on 1 March 1898—Gen. Misc., 30-33, July 1898.

34. RIFLC 1908, Vol II, Evidences.

35. *Ibid.*, Vol I.

36. In the opinion of C.A. Walsh, Special Inspector of Factories the shift system in jute mills became so complicated that it required the services of a Chartered Accountant to be continually present in a mill to check such a system of working—Gen. Misc. 29-34, August 1907. R. P. Adams, Special Inspector of Factories also remarked that the system could be so arranged as to show on paper that different classes of workers were not being worked contrary to the restrictions of the Bill but in actual practice neither the Inspector,

Not only were the hours of work excessively long ; also the mills started work very early. With the introduction of electric light it became almost a general practice. It appears that the first whistle was blown at 3 a.m. in the morning. Kazi Zahiruddin Ahmad of Kankinara Jute Mills in his evidence before the Factory Labour Commission stated that to make them come inside the mill before 4 a.m. and leave it at 9 p.m. in winter was to practise sheer cruelty on them.³⁷ Imaman Imanisher, *Sirdar* of the same mill narrated their plight saying that they got home at about 9 p.m. and did not get to bed till about 11 p.m., they had to get up again the next day at about 3 a.m., prepare their food, wash and get to work by 4 a.m. They kept awake during the day by taking snuff frequently.³⁸

The only restrictions provided in the amended Act of 1891 on the working hours of adult males were, half an hour's midday interval and weekly closing on Sunday or any other day in a week, which too was not honoured. Sunday or weekly holiday was not general in factories. Many factories were exempted from this provision by the order of the government on the ground that continuous work was essential for such industries e.g. jute presses.³⁹ In factories where Sunday was prescribed as a holiday, such holidays were more nominal than real. The usual practice was to continue mill work till late on Saturday night and to call upon the workers on Sunday morning for regular repairing and cleaning of machinery. The amendment of the Factory Act in 1891 failed to stop this practice. C. A. Walsh, Special Inspector of Factories found during his inspection in 1898, work on Sundays in several mills and the work was principally in the nature of repair, lime washing, cleaning, painting, hand sewing and packing.⁴⁰ The provision in the existing Act permitting supervisory or mechanical staff to examine or repair machinery on Sunday without imposing on the owner the obligation to give a compensatory holiday was being grossly misinterpreted to bring the whole body

the Manager, nor his assistants would be in a position to state the exact number of hours worked by the different classes.—Gen. Misc., 85-94, January 1910.

37. RIFLC 1908 Vol II, Evidences, Witness No. 176.

38. *Ibid.*, Witness No. 182.

39. Gen. Misc., 24-33, December 1892.

40. ARWIFAB 1898, Gen. Misc., 17-33, August 1899.

of workers or a considerable proportion of them to clean machinery on Sundays without providing any compensatory holiday.⁴¹

It is needless to mention that working under such condition of unbearable hardship women and child labourers had a pitiable existence. In their evidence before the Indian Factory Commission 1890 operatives representing different mills such as Howrah Cotton Mill, Budge Budge Jute Mill, Bengal Cotton Mill, Baranagar Jute Mill, Bally Paper Mill and others disclosed that women operatives were working same hours as their male counterparts.⁴² The Factory Act 1891 limited the daily hours of work for women labour to 11 hours a day. However this legal restriction could hardly alter their actual condition since factory owners and managers did not care to pay any heed to this provision of the Act. There were also several instances of night work by female labourers in contravention of the law prohibiting such night work. The Dundee Chamber of Commerce drew the attention of the Secretary of State for India to the injustice of competition arising out of 22 hours of work by women and young persons and 15 hours by children as against 10 hours in England.⁴³ The comparison drawn by Dundee Chamber was no doubt prompted by their own interest but an examination of the actual state of affairs reveals that there was truth in what they said. The Factory Labour Commission 1908 also observed that in seasonal factories like ginning mills where women were employed in large numbers, excessively long hours were worked.⁴⁴ Dr. Nair in his Minute of Dissent remarked, the greatest abuses, if any, in the factories in India, exist in the ginning factories and especially in smaller ones. And the abuses become all the more horrible as the sufferers here are all women.⁴⁵

Since women operatives had to spend such long hours within the walls of the factories, very often their little children, even infants in arms accompanied their mothers and might be seen crawling about the premises or found asleep at night in the midst of fluff and dust of a mill. Curiously enough, the Managers, when

41. RIFLC 1908, Vol I.

42. RIFC 1890, Evidences.

43. Gen. Misc., 28-32, May 1895.

44. RIFLC 1908, Vol I.

45. *Ibid.*, Dr. Nair's Minute of Dissent.

their attention was drawn to the cruel practice, tried to defend it on humanitarian grounds saying that they could not prevent it because in that case their mothers were to be turned out of employment.

In case of female operatives the very early beginning or late closing of mills also proved extremely harmful. The Special Inspector of Factories observed that there were roughly speaking 22,000 women working in the jute mills alone and 16,000 children all under 14 years of age, majority would average 9 or 10 years who are compelled to leave their homes at 4.30 a.m. to be present at the mills at 5 a.m.⁴⁶ T. W. Clark, Superintendent of Kankinara and Kamarhati Mills also condemned this practice saying it was destructive of all kind of proper family life.⁴⁷

The exploitation was at its worst in case of child labour. At the early stage of industrial development very small children were employed in large numbers and no limit was set to their hours of work. The first Factory Act of 1881 prohibited employment of children under 7 and limited the hours of work of children between the age of 7 and 12 to 9 hours a day. One wonders how an Act framed by a responsible Government could give legal sanction to a system where a child of 7 years was required to work for 9 long hours in the uncongenial atmosphere of a factory. Even this restriction was applied only to concerns employing 100 or more labourers and did not affect gins or presses, classed as seasonal factories which employed a large number of child labour. In factories coming within the scope of the Act this provision restricting hours of child labour was grossly violated. Some factories openly refused to abide by the requirements laid down in the Act. e.g., Kamarhati Jute Mills, Baranagar and Beliaghata Jute Factories, Union Jute Mill, Clive Jute Mill, Budge Budge Jute Mill etc. where the managers of the mills felt that not to work the children for 3 hours at a stretch and granting them subsequent half an hour's interval would mean stoppage of the mill and consequent injury both to trade and the interest of the countrymen.⁴⁸ In some jute mills e.g. Hooghly Jute Mill, the hours of work were so arranged for children that though actual working hours did not exceed 9

46. Gen. Misc., 6, January 1906.

47. RIFLC 1908, Vol II, Evidences, Witness No. 170.

48. Gen. Misc. 5-10, January 1882.

hours most of the children were required to stay at the mill throughout the day and thus they were denied the freedom to move about and play at their own free will.

Another gross violation of the Act committed by the mill authorities was employment of children below the age of 7. A survey of the reports on the working of the Indian Factories Act in Bengal shows that a considerable number of children employed in mills were under the prescribed age of 7. And it was obviously an act of sheer cruelty to make them work in the mill almost the whole day. The amended Act of 1891 further raised the age limit of children from 7-12 to 9-14, limited their hours of work to 7 hours, prohibited night work, provided a midday stoppage of half an hour and a weekly holiday.⁴⁹

However, even though limited in scope this legislative restriction failed to produce any practical effect and could not in any way fetter the hands of the industrialists. Millowners, managers and their jobbers did not pay any heed either to the age limit set by the Act or to the maximum hours of work. Night work was also resorted to and midday interval provided in the Act was not at all allowed in the mills.

In case of usual shifts, such as,

A Shift—6 a.m. to 9 a.m., 12 noon to 3 p.m.

B Shift—9 a.m. to 12 noon, 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.

it was found that a boy in A shift working till 9 a.m. in one mill would cross over to another adjoining mill and work there till 12 to return to the former mill and work till 3 p.m. and so on.⁵⁰ What miserable plight led the children of such tender age to work double shifts continuously from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. can be easily imagined.

Apart from the manipulation of the hours of work, very little consideration was shown to the minimum age limit fixed by the provision of the Act. Dr. Murray, the Civil Surgeon of Howrah, narrated how his appearance in the spinning room of a mill was the signal for a general disappearance of children and several others who seemed to him to be under age vanished among the

49. It may be recalled here that at the International Labour Conference held at Berlin in 1890 it was decided that the actual work of children below 14 should not exceed 6 hours a day.

50. Gen. Misc., 8-9, January 1895.

machinery and could not be found.⁵¹ Incidents like this were a very common phenomenon. Instances of children working after 8 p.m. at night, though prohibited by law were also not difficult to find. Very early commencement of work at the mill also added to their sufferings. There is enough evidence to show how thousands of small children only 9 or 10 years of age had to leave their homes only at 4.30 a.m. in the morning in order to commence work at 5 a.m. whether in hot or cold season.

Another device, in the opinion of the Commission, to evade law and to employ the workers in excess of their legal hours was the pretext of having so-called schools for the half timers inside the mill compound. The Commission during tour found frequent instances of such abuse.

That these abuses were practised widely was no secret, the managers were aware of this and were not at all ashamed to admit this before the Commission. One manager stated that he did not send children to be certified prior to employment as he had the suspicion that most of them would probably be rejected. Another manager frankly admitted that the mills had made no change whatever in their system consequent on the amendment of the Factory law in 1891 and that the system in force prior to that date had been continued unaltered.⁵²

When such was the condition in larger mills like jute and cotton mills which were regulated by the Factory Act one can easily guess the state of affairs in smaller concerns which were outside the scope of the Factory Act and also the condition in gins and presses which habitually worked for a longer period. In some seasonal factories like ginning and rice mills excessively long hours were worked. The gins occasionally worked with one set of hands for periods of 12 to 18 hours and for 24 hours with a double shift. Since the same set of workers could not normally work for more than 14 or 15 hours at the most, they would be allowed to take frequent intervals or rest which was provided by engaging a number of additional workers.⁵³ Dr. Nair maintained that operatives of ginning factories had on occasion to work 17 or 18 hours a day. In rice mills and flour mills men had occa-

51. ARWIFAB 1897, Gen. Misc., 1-35, September 1898.

52. RIFLC 1908 ; Vol I, Appendix.

53. *Ibid.*, Vol I.

sionally to work 20 or 22 hours and in printing presses men had to work for 22 hours a day for 7 consecutive days.⁵⁴ In his evidence before the Factory Labour Commission 1908 a witness from a jute pressing factory stated that the work was so strenuous that they could not stand the strain for more than 6 months at a time and when working they did not as a rule work more than 20 days a month.⁵⁵ Paper mills worked day and night. One witness from a paper mill stated before the Commission of 1908 that the mill employing 1050 hands including 170 women and 80 children worked day and night stopping only from midnight on Saturday to midnight on Sunday, the shifts changing at 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.⁵⁶

In the coal mines hours of work were very irregular. The miners coming from the most backward section of the village population used to come in groups from villages several miles away and often preferred to work upto 24 hours before returning home for a period of rest which might be as long or longer. In the collieries under Bengal Coal Company in Ranigunge the miners generally attended in the morning between 9 and 12 and preferred to work in double shifts of 24 hours each. They were allowed out in the evening for their food, to come back again but were not allowed to go away till they had filled one tub per man.⁵⁷

Loud claims were made by owners and managers of factories that the workers were well contented so far as their hours of work were concerned ; and they stressed that the demand for restriction of hours of work was the work of philanthropists and interested persons of Dundee and Lancashire. The actual course of events however proved the falsity of claims made by them. Unable to stand such nerveracking toil the workers registered their protests in various forms, from humble petition to active strike struggle. In this early phase absenteeism and labour turn-over was nothing but a form of protest against excessive hard work. The workers openly expressed their resentment in their evidence before the Factory Labour Commission 1908. Mohammad Zulfaqr Hyder, Honourary Secretary, Mohammedan Association, Kankinara ex-

54. *Ibid.*, Dr. Nair's Minute of Dissent.

55. *Ibid.*, Vol II, Evidences, Witness No. 103.

56. *Ibid.*, Witness No. 106.

57. Foley's *Report on Labour in Bengal*, Chapter VIII.

pressed the desire of the majority of workers when he pleaded for shorter hours of work. From his statements it further appeared that 500 Hindu and Muslim operatives of Naihati Mills had assembled at a meeting and unanimously raised the demand for shorter hours. Similar views were expressed by Imaman Imanisher, *Sirdar* in the weaving department of the Kankinara Jute Mills and also other weavers from Kankinara and Budge Budge Jute Mills.⁵⁸

Just after the introduction of electric light which resulted in increase in working hours in many mills the workers sought to resist this evil by resorting to small strikes which were more frequent in 1896.⁵⁹ Such a strike of a short duration occurred at the North and South mills, Baranagar.⁶⁰ Some workers of the Sibpur Jute Mill made a complaint to the Magistrate of Howrah about the long duration of their work and asked for redress.⁶¹ C. A. Walsh, Special Inspector of Factories, found several mills on strike for long periods during 1905 and he ascribed this unrest to long hours of work.⁶² During the year 1906 many mills, viz., Hastings, Clive, Wellington, Arathoon, Soorah, Bengal Cotton and Upper Hooghly Mills were affected by strike and in the opinion of C.A. Walsh, in several instances discontent could be traced to long hours of work.⁶³ In March of the same year the workers of Fort Gloster Jute Mill, Bowreah struck work for the second time and this time their grievance was against excessively long working hours.⁶⁴ Similarly the operatives of Arathoon Jute Mill struck work during 1906 demanding shorter hours of work.⁶⁵ The weavers of Hastings Jute Mill, Rishra, submitted a petition to the Commissioner of Burdwan complaining against the long hours they had to work in the mill.⁶⁶ In October 1910 the coolies working in the Spinning Department of the Fuleswar Cotton Mill in the district of Howrah struck work since they were required to

58. RIFLC 1908, Vol II, Evidences, Witness Nos. 181, 182, 183, 184, 192, 193.

59. ARWIFAB 1896 ; Gen. Misc., 1-28, September 1897.

60. *Ibid.*

61. ARWIFAB 1903 ; Gen. Misc., 45-46, August 1904.

62. *Ibid.*, 1905, Gen. Misc., 25, September 1906.

63. *Ibid.*, 1906, Gen. Misc., 29-52, August 1907.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal*, Appendix, p. xxv.

66. Gen. Misc., B 53, March 1907.

attend their work at 7.30 a.m. instead of 8.30 a.m. as demanded by them. Later on they were joined by hands employed in other departments also.⁶⁷

This reluctance of the workers to work for excessively long hours was, according to Dr. Nair, one of the reasons for labour shortage in Indian mills.⁶⁸ In course of his investigation into the problem of shortage of labour, Foley found that shortage of labour could be solved only by reducing the hours of work.⁶⁹ Even Mr. David Yule, possibly the biggest employer of labour at that time had to admit that 'the incessant daily grind on women and children keeps many of them from working in the mills'⁷⁰

The industrialists and their agents very often tried to justify such prolonged hours of work by laying stress on the peculiar habits of Indian workers of taking frequent leaves and loitering, which, according to them, reduced their actual hours of work. However, as has been stated earlier and also emphasized by Dr. Nair, this was not because of ingrained habit but was only a manifestation of adaptive capacity which all human beings possess more or less. He maintained, 'intense and concentrated labour in a cotton mill for 13 or 14 hours, day after day, week after week and month after month is beyond the physical endurance of ordinary human beings. . . . so that he has to adopt himself for that work in such a way that he can get through the work required of him with least possible injury to himself.'⁷¹

System of Wages. What the workers obtained as wage was not commensurate with the severe strain they had to undergo. In capitalist relations the capitalists need the workers as means of profit and it is to their interest to keep the wage at minimum. The workers have no choice but to accept this meagre wage because they possess nothing but their labour power and can live only by selling that labour power. In official reports it was often claimed that the material condition of the factory operatives was 'favourable'. Now the question is 'favourable' in relation to what? It appears that it looked favourable when compared with the

67. ARWIFAB 1910, Gen. Misc., 33-35, August 1911.

68. RIFLC 1908, Dr. Nair's Minute of Dissent.

69. *Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal*, p. 13.

70. Gen. Misc., 3-10, April 1899.

71. RIFLC 1908, Dr. Nair's Minute of Dissent.

earnings of the lowest and most unfortunate part of the agricultural group. . . . the hungry half of the population which furnished perhaps 95 p.c. of the factory labour.⁷² This is explicit in the observation made by C.E. Buckland, Commissioner, Presidency Division. He stated. . . . 'It is not with the well-to-do raiyat holding land on fixed tenure that comparison should be made but with that of the landless labourers which is the class from which factory operatives are recruited.'⁷³

India was well known for her cheap labour and this was due to widespread poverty of the masses and very low standard of their living. This cheapness of labour was an incentive to foreign capitalists to invest their capital in Indian industries. From available statistics, whatever of them could be obtained, it appears that for years together the wages remained almost stationary without any appreciable change notwithstanding the fact that the prices of foodgrains and other necessary articles were rising, sometimes rising abnormally. The Annual Administrative Reports of different Divisions repeatedly pointed out that fluctuations in the price of foodgrains did not generally affect the wages of labour which were in a manner 'fixed by custom' in different districts and localities so that rise or fall in the prices of foodgrains had no appreciable effect on the prices of labour.⁷⁴

To add to it there were also instances of wages being reduced inspite of steady rise in prices of foodgrains. In Burdwan, for instance rates of wages had shown a tendency to recede rather than advance though the prices of food had risen very much during the period.⁷⁵ In their evidence before the Factory Labour Commission, Bakarali Imaman, line *Sirdar* at Kankinara Mill and another weaver Abdul Razak Taz Mohammad stated that of late their rates of pay had been reduced from 8½ annas to 7½ annas though the yardage increased from 100 to 130.⁷⁶

It was claimed that during 1905/06 – 1909/10 wages generally

72. D. H. Buchanan, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-18.

73. ARWIFAB 1898, Gen. Misc., 17-31, August 1899.

74. AGAR, Burdwan Division, 1886-92.

Ibid., Presidency Division, 1888-89.

75. RLEC 1896.

76. RIFLC 1908, Vol II, Evidences, Witness Nos. 183, 184.

showed a marked increase.⁷⁷ In order to estimate real increase two factors must be taken into account. First, during the period prices of food stuff, viz, common rice, wheat, gram etc. ruled much higher. Another factor which is very often overlooked is that after the introduction of electric light there was an extension of working hours and this enabled the factory hands to earn one and half days' extra wage every week. Taking into account this factor, Foley in his report observed that on the whole the increase had not been great, not more than 10 p.c. in the last 20 years.⁷⁸

There is enough evidence in official reports to show that in Bengal jute trade was on the whole remunerative. Except for a few years the margin of profit to the manufacturers had been satisfactory and the dividends to the shareholders were also being paid regularly.⁷⁹ Of course the amount of dividend paid or the profit earned was difficult to ascertain, the mill authorities being reluctant to furnish such 'confidential' details. Notwithstanding this fairly remunerative state of jute trade there was no appreciable change in the rates of wages of labourers. The jute mills, it appears took utmost precaution to prevent rates from rising further.⁸⁰

The following table makes it clear how the wages continued to remain static or showed only marginal rise despite noticeable increase in the prices of essential goods like foodgrains.⁸¹

77. *Quinquennial Administration Report of the Presidency and Burdwan Division 1905-06 - 1909-10*; Gen. Misc., 9-10, April 1911. 6-7, September 1911.

78. *Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal*; Ch. III, p. 10.

79. AGAR, *Presidency Division 1892-93, 1898-99, 1899-1901*

80. *Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal*; Ch. III, p. 10.

81. *Prices and Wages in India, 1910.*

TABLE 6

Average Annual Prices of Rice and Wheat in Rupees and Decimals of a Rupee per Maund.

Province and District	Rice						Wheat					
	1890	1896	1897	1900	1906	1908	1890	1896	1897	1900	1906	1908
<i>Bengal</i>												
24 Parganas	2.672	3.263	—	3.487	4.582	5.755	2.786	—	—	—	4.149	5.405
Calcutta	2.967	3.653	5.236	3.626	5.07	6.309	2.996	3.77	4.969	3.911	3.828	5.602
Hooghly	3.037	3.656	4.773	3.607	5.057	6.431	3.077	3.7	4.149	3.697	4.706	—
Burdwan	2.465	2.913	4.211	3.033	4.315	5.594	2.845	3.512	4.405	—	—	—
Orissa	2.008	2.247	3.531	3.074	3.512	3.568	2.801	3.645	5.058	3.949	3.557	5.357
Chotonagpur	2.121	2.978	4.084	3.211	3.736	5.962	3.002	3.858	5.014	3.745	3.961	5.694
Bihar (South)	2.438	2.959	4.29	3.089	3.921	5.558	2.437	3.413	4.234	3.041	3.491	4.991
United Province (Agra)	3.239	3.919	4.853	4.062	4.542	5.332	2.645	3.632	4.134	3.374	3.375	4.799
Bihar (North)	2.452	2.86	4.142	2.949	4.34	5.807	2.51	3.43	4.52	3.071	3.763	5.048

TABLE 6 (Contd.)
Average Wages (in Rupees) in a Jute Mill in Bengal.

	Carding	Rovers	Spinners	Per Week			Beamers	Weavers	Mistries	Per Day	
				Shifters	Winders	Coolies					
1890	1.31	2	2.25	.75	2		2.5	4.5	.62		.28
1892	1.34	2	2.25	.75	2.25		2.5	4.5	.75		.28
1894	1.37	2.06	2.5	.87	2.5		2.75	4.75	.81		.3
1896	1.37	2.19	2.5	.87	2.5		2.75	4.75	.81		.3
1898	1.41	2.19	2.75	.87	2.75		2.75	.5	.81		.3
1900	1.44	2.25	3	1	3		3	5.25	.87		.31
1902	1.44	2.25	3	1	3		3.25	5.25	.87		.31
1904	1.47	2.37	3.25	1.12	3.25		3.25	5.37	.94		.34
1906	1.47	2.5	3.25	1.12	3.25		3.5	5.37	.94		.34
1908	1.5	2.75	3.5	1.25	3.5		3.75	5.5	1		.37
1910	1.5	2.75	3.5	1.25	3.5		3.75	5.5	1		.37

From inadequate and very fragmentary data available about rates of wages paid to different classes of operatives an attempt is being made here to form a general idea about the amount of money wages enjoyed by different classes of operatives. The rate of wages paid was not uniform and it varied from industry to industry.

During 1881-82 and 1886-87 the price of labour (per week) in 24 Parganas was⁸²

	Skilled						Unskilled							
	Rs	As	P		Rs	As	P	Rs	As	P		Rs	As	P
1881-82	0	6	0	to	0	8	0	0	4	0	to	0	5	0
1886-87	0	8	0	to	1	0	0	0	5	0	to	0	8	0

During 1892 the weekly rates of wages of different classes of operatives in the mills of Hooghly district, viz, Wellington and Hastings Jute Mill, Rishra, India Jute Mill, Serampore, Champdani Jute Mill, Victoria Jute Mill etc. varied as follows⁸³

	Rs	As	P	Rs	As	P
Males	1	8	0	5	8	0
Females	1	4	0	3	0	0
Boys	0	12	0	3	0	0
Girls	0	12	0	1	6	0

During the same year in the province of Bengal it was reported that men and women generally earned Rs. 6-0-0 to Rs. 8-0-0 a month and children from Rs. 2-8-0 to Rs. 5-0-0. Skilled workmen ordinarily earned from Rs. 20-0-0 to Rs. 40-0-0 a month.⁸⁴

Around the same time in Gun and Shell Factory a male operative Oneroodec (42) was paid 12 annas a day ; in a Sugar Works Bairagee, a male operative earned 4 annas, 6 pies for 8 hours' work and in jute presses workers were paid at uncertain times by contractors and could earn 5 annas 9 pies a day for pressing one bale.⁸⁵

82. AGAR, Presidency Division 1881/82, 1886/87, Gen. Misc. 3-4, October 1882 ; 3-5, November 1887.

83. ARWIFAB 1892, Gen. Misc., 6-11, August 1893.

84. *Ibid.*, 24-33, August 1893.

85. RIFC 1890, Evidences.

Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal records rates of weekly wages in jute mills during 1904-05 (supplied by IJMA)

	<i>Ordinary</i>		<i>Trained</i>	
	Rs	As	Rs	As
Weavers	4	0	6	8
Spinners (Boys)	2	10	3	7
Sewers (Men & Women)	2	8	3	0
Winders (Men)	3	0	4	0
Unskilled Labour	2	4	2	12
Women	1	4	2	1
Children (Shifter)	1	0	1	6

In Cotton Mills payment was generally made monthly, the rates being

	Rs	As	Rs	As
Spinner	13	0	20	0
Piecers	5	0	12	0
Carding	9	0	17	0
Reeling (Piece work)	8	10	14	0
Coolies etc.	7	0	9	086

In Bengal Iron and Steel Works rates of wages had not changed materially for years as the following figures show :⁸⁷

	<i>Skilled Labour</i>					
	June 1893			June 1905		
	Rs	As	P	Rs	As	P
Fitters	16	8	8	17	3	3
Carpenters	10	8	7	19	4	7
Moulders	19	5	1	19	6	1
Case Makers	17	6	3	15	7	3
Engineers	14	8	9	15	2	4
Blacksmith and Stockers	15	11	7	15	2	5

In Bengal Paper Mill, Ranigunge wages were paid monthly and the average was Rs. 7-0-0 to Rs. 8-0-0 a month inside the mill

86. *Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal*, Ch. III, IV, pp. 9, 19.

87. *Ibid.*, Appendix.

and Rs. 5-0-0 to Rs. 6-0-0 outside.⁸⁸ In majority of the collieries labour was paid 5 annas, 5 annas 6 pies to 6 annas for cutting a tub.⁸⁹

The wage statistics reveal a great disparity in wages of different categories of workers belonging to the same industry. For instance during 1892-93 in Budge Budge wages varied from Rs. 2-8 to Rs. 25-0 per month.⁹⁰ Though no such clear statistics are available as may enable us to ascertain the position, it may be assumed that majority of the Indian operatives coming from the most backward section of the village people were mostly unskilled and were entitled to the lower slab of the wage rate whereas skilled and trained workmen belonged mainly to the category of foreman, engineer etc., a majority of whom were Europeans or Anglo-Indians and they enjoyed higher slabs of wage.⁹¹

Another factor testifying to the increased exploitation of labour was the discrimination which prevailed in the wages of men, women and children. Again, under the Factory Act though the children were required to work only half the time there was much abuse of child labour ; and actually a large number of them worked full hours like the adults ; and women workers too worked the same hours as men, though their earnings were not same. Women and children were often discriminated against. For example, during 1892-93 in 24 Parganas while men were earning 9 annas per day on an average, women were earning 5 annas and children 2 annas 8 pies.⁹² Fakir Dolie, a boy of 13, working in Empress of India Cotton Mill earned Rs 4/- a month while his father earned Rs. 9/- though the son had been working the same hours as the father since he had joined the mill at the age of 10½.⁹³

In the Jute Mills the general tendency was to keep the wages from rising further and consequently the wages remained almost

88. *Ibid.*, Appendix.

89. *Ibid.*

90. ARWIFAB 1892, Gen. Misc., 12-13, August 1893.

91. Buchanan's observation in this connection deserves mention. He writes in iron and steel industry 'the wages or salaries given to European and American foremen owing to their superior skill and managing ability are very high in comparison, the average being equivalent to the wages of sixty eight Indians.'—D. H. Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

92. ARWIFAB 1892, Gen. Misc., 12-13, August 1893.

93. RIFC 1890, Evidences.

stationary for years together. However with a view to meeting the crisis of over-production the jute mills, by arrangement, worked 4 days a week and this arrangement continued for years on end. Naturally it led to a reduction in wages of labour who were paid for actual hours worked. So this arrangement which was made in the interest of the owners of jute industry adversely affected the workers by reducing their income which was already very low. Shyama Charan Samuth, a weaver in Budge Budge Jute Mills told the Factory Labour Commission that under new rules he worked 4 days a week and was consequently suffering loss of income.⁹⁴

For a proper understanding of the economic condition of the factory operatives a mere study of the amount of money wage is not enough. We must also take into account the different factors which determined their real wage. The amount of wage which the workers received included different additions like bonus for regular attendance, bonus for good work and so on which were likely to be withdrawn in case of absence without leave, for bad work etc. resulting in reduction in real wages. Rajani, a jute spinner, working in Union Jute Mill stated before the Factory Commission that if she absented herself she lost the bonus of 2 annas a week which she could otherwise expect to get for regular attendance, besides losing that day's pay.⁹⁵

In many of the mills this practice of paying bonus was often withdrawn on various grounds. For absence without leave or for bad work the workers were deprived of the bonus and were subjected to other pecuniary losses ; they were made to pay fines and certain other deductions also were made from their meagre wages. Hem Chunder, a spinner employed in Budge Budge Jute Mill stated in his evidence that if he was absent with leave for a day there was only a day's pay cut but if he was absent without leave for two days he had to court the risk of losing six days' pay because in that case 4 Sundays which were otherwise paid holidays would be treated as days of no work and the pay for those Sundays would be withheld.⁹⁶ Beni Madhav, employed in Bally Paper Mill, stated that if he took leave, a day's pay was cut but if he

94. RIFC 1890. Evidences.

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Ibid.*

stayed away without leave he ran the risk of being fined or discharged.⁹⁷ The manager of Bengal Cotton Mill admitted that if a man attended a full month without missing a day he was paid for the Sundays and if he was absent for a day without leave he had to suffer a cut of 2 annas for every rupee of his monthly pay.⁹⁸

Commissions or '*dasturi*' to *sirdars* or *jobbers* was another form of extortion which the workers could hardly avoid. It was through the jobbers that the workers generally obtained their job and in return he was paid commission. Since the jobbers had much influence upon the work people they often made the workers part with a portion of their periodical wages. In many cases this kind of extortion became a continuous practice lasting as long as the labourers were in employment. The payment of the initial sum agreed on was followed by the demand for a regular sum on each pay day.⁹⁹ It is difficult to estimate the real amount of '*dasturi*' because for obvious reasons individuals were disinclined to disclose details. It was a sort of bribery which went on unchecked. The system was not limited to foremen alone but involved also higher officials whether Europeans or Indians.¹⁰⁰ In one case it was estimated that *sirdar's* wage was from Rs. 50/- to Rs. 60/- a month while the amazing toll of *bakshish* he gathered in, amounted to Rs. 200/- or Rs. 300/- a month.¹⁰¹ Kazi Zahiruddin Ahmad of Kankinara Mill in his evidence laid bare the extent of this extortion made by the *sirdars* and the mill *babus*. The operatives, he said, were compelled to bribe the *sirdar* or '*babu*' to obtain employment. The *sirdar* and '*babu*' worked in collusion. The '*babu*' sometimes received half the money and sometimes a quarter, depending upon his influence on the *sirdar* . . . He further added that for the hands there was no escaping from this vile system of extortion. He knew of one man who refused to pay and was in consequence hunted down by the *sirdar* and prevented from obtaining employment. A weaver, who paid '*dasturi*' was not reported against if he idled about ; but if he refused to pay then

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal*, 1906, Appendix.

99. J. H. Kelman ; *Labour in India*, London. 1923. n. 107.

100. D. H. Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 338

101. J. H. Kelman, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

the overseer was told directly that the weaver had left his loom idle.¹⁰²

It appears that the poor, helpless weavers coming from the depressed agricultural areas had to fall a prey to the avarice of these *sirdars* only to avoid starvation. Taking advantage of their helplessness the *sirdars* sought to exploit them in many ways as they could. In many cases the *sirdars* let out lines for their housing at exorbitant rates. The *sirdars* also used to advance money which the workers needed to supplement their wages, which in many cases was below the subsistence level and taking advantage of their ignorance the *sirdars* tried to squeeze out as much as possible as interest on the sum advanced. Added to these were various other occasional deductions. For example, female workers with little infants had to pay few annas to have them cared for by others. And the weavers who worked full hours without any interval, in order to get respite for meals etc had to employ extra hands who were paid by the weavers themselves.¹⁰³

While jute mills paid wages weekly, in cotton and other mills monthly payment was made. In coal mines, however, the system of daily payment was in vogue, though in some mines, weekly or fortnightly payment was made. Since the workers in most cases, lived close to the level of subsistence, a long interval between payments often caused them immense hardship. Whether payment was made monthly or weekly the workers could never enjoy the full earning of the period worked. It was a common practice to withhold a portion of the wages, that is, they were paid on the pay day not the wages earned upto that date but upto some previous date. Usually, where weekly payment was in practice one week's wage and in case of monthly payment 15 days' wage was kept back. Majoo Maithi, employed in Bowreah Cotton Mills, in his evidence stated that he got his pay on 22nd or 23rd of the month following that for which it was due.¹⁰⁴ The Manager of the Empress India Cotton Mill also confessed that he paid once a month keeping back 20 days' pay.¹⁰⁵ Sir Pradyot Kumar Tagore,

102. RIFLC 1908, Vol II, Evidences. Witness No. 176.

103. RIFC 1890, Evidences.

104. *Ibid.*

105. *Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal, 1906, Appendix.*

the Honourary Secretary, British Indian Association remarked that a very large number of operatives, had complained that the wages of a month were usually paid at the end of the following month.¹⁰⁶ Thus it appears that there were occasions when even a full month's wages were kept back. The effect of this practice on the operatives can hardly be exaggerated. Generally the justification put forward by mill authorities was that it would ensure regular attendance of the workers. In reality this was nothing but fraud practised by the mill authorities as a result of which the mill hands had to borrow at a high rate of interest and often they found themselves hopelessly in debt so much so that sometimes unable to repay the debt, they were compelled to leave the locality. In fact, wages thus held back were often forfeited depriving the poor workers of their hard earned money. Mr. C. W. Bolton, Magistrate, 24 Parganas, in his report referred to the prevalence of this improper practice of forfeiture of wage for leaving factory without notice in some of the factories he visited.¹⁰⁷ Mohammad Zulfaqr Hyder, the Honourary Secretary, Mohammedan Association, Kankinara, only expressed the general reaction of the broad section of the workers when in his evidence he urged that back wages should be given to the party concerned and should not be forfeited.¹⁰⁸ So not only in case of leaving the mill, but in normal course also wages were forfeited in many mills after 5 weeks. One redeeming feature, however, was that such a gross injustice did not always go unchallenged. There were instances where workers, though ignorant and helpless had turned to law courts for the recovery of their back wages and had won their cases.¹⁰⁹

For a proper understanding of the economic status of Indian factory operatives, the huge burden of debt which they had to bear, must be taken in account. Though much is not known about the workers' involvement in debt it may be assumed from the position of the Indian workers' living on the bare level of subsistence and the system of exploitation to which they were subjected,

106. Gen. Misc., 124, November 1908.

107. ARWIFAB 1887, Gen. Misc., 28-53, November 1888.

108. RIFLC 1908, Vol II, Evidences, Witness No. 181.

109. RIFC 1890, Evidences.

that very often they had to get into debt. Their income being very inadequate, whenever they had to meet any extra expenditure, viz, social expenses like marriage, funeral etc. or for prolonged illness they had to borrow money. In view of continuous rise in prices, sometimes for their bare subsistence too, they had to borrow money. Sometimes the grain dealers allowed the bill to run for a month and made an extra profit of an anna per rupee. A few instances are cited here to show the extent of such borrowing among the workers and its effects on them. Kedar Das, employed in Bengal Cotton Mill stated that he was in debt to the extent of about Rs. 100/- on account of his daughter's marriage.¹¹⁰ His monthly wage being only Rs. 21/- it may be easily imagined how long he would have to bear the burden of the ruinous rate of interest. One jute mill clerk, it appears, told of a case in which a worker owed Rs. 16/- and paid Re. 1/- per week to the lender during 6 or 8 years.¹¹¹ This is not an exceptional case. Being ignorant the borrower had no definite idea as to what rate of interest he was to pay. He could neither read the amount of the principal nor the interest rate. Moreover since his bargaining position was very weak he had no other alternative than to accept whatever terms he was offered.

Naturally, such a system of exploitation could not but rouse angry protest from the workers. Of such protest and resistance by the workers not much is known. However the little that can be gathered about them belies the false notion created by the mill authorities about the 'favourable material condition' of the workers

As early as in 1885-86 it is reported that the production in cotton mills was curtailed due to strikes against a reduction of 12½ p.c. in wages necessitated by depressed state of the trade.¹¹² Between 1881-90 in Ghosuri Cotton Mill there were two strikes involving all the operatives of the Mill, one lasting for 3 and another for 10 days, the immediate cause being dispute over wages.¹¹³

110. *Ibid.*

111. D. H. Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

112. AGAR, Presidency Division 1885-86, Gen. Misc., 3-4, November 1886.

113. Gen. Misc., 19, September 1892.

During 1895 there were series of disturbances in different mills in 24 Parganas in connection with the wages of the operatives. In April 1895, at the Titagarh Jute Mill trouble arose as a result of the stoppage of pay of some Muslims who absented themselves on the day of Bakr Id festival. The Manager was threatened, there was a riot and the police were roughly handled. It was followed by the arrest of the ringleaders and their punishment. A similar trouble broke out in Kamarhati Mills on the occasion of Muharram and was met by concession of holidays. The disturbance at the Kankinara Mill was prompted by the reduction in the pay of the spinners from Rs. 3-8 to Rs. 3-4. The Manager's attempt to lockout the ringleaders caused excitement and they were arrested. One cause of the disturbance appeared to be the practice of keeping back a week's pay which the operatives resented because it prevented them from leaving a mill for better wages in another for that would cost them the sacrifice of a week's wages. In July 1895 the spinners of a jute factory in Garden Reach raised a demand for higher wages and a strike was averted by granting concessions. In August when the Manager of Budge Budge Jute Mill ordered a lockout of the operatives who had struck work protesting against the restoration of an unpopular overseer, who used to hold back a week's pay, the operatives retaliated by attacking the European quarters in the factory and the European employees had to use fire arms. The rioters were arrested and convicted.¹¹⁴

Again in 1907 the workmen of the Samastipur Railway demanded an increase of pay and struck work on 4th December, Work was resumed only after some concession was granted.¹¹⁵ In October 1909 more than 300 weavers of Bally Jute Mill struck work as they failed to obtain an increase in the rates of wages. The mill had to be closed for a short time, the strikers resumed work on obtaining a little increase in the rates.¹¹⁶ In 1911 there was a strike at the Belvedere Jute Mill, Howrah. It was occasioned by an attempt to make the operatives work extra hours without additional pay. Another strike occurred in the same year at the Em-

114. ARWIFAB 1895, Gen. Misc., 21-22, July 1896.

115. *Ibid.*, 1907, Gen. Misc., 78-80, July 1908.

116. *Ibid.*, 1909, Gen. Misc., 61-64, August 1910.

press of India Jute Press because the contractor delayed the payment to the workmen. It ended as soon as the payment was made.¹¹⁷

Housing condition of the mill operatives. Due to prolonged hours of work in factories most of the workers could not enjoy a single day light hour at home. During the very few hours they could spend at home they were deprived of the minimum comforts of living. The expropriated peasants and artisans who crowded the towns in search of job, herded together in low, dark, ill-ventilated ill-conserved bustees near the mills, which were not fit for human habitation. There is no dearth of official admission of this miserable plight of the work people. Mr. C.A. Walsh, Special Inspector of Factories, observed, 'Glance over the boundary wall of Baranagar (North) Mill or walk a hundred yards from Shyamnagar, Titagarh or other large mills and look at the miserable quarters of those whose lot it is to labour daily in the mill. A collection of filthy hovels meets the eye, constructed rudely of mud, thatched with grass or old Kerosene oil tin flattened out, devoid of drainage and too crowded for a proper supply of air. It remains a marvel how human life, however accustomed to insanitary surroundings, can survive. When it is considered that so many mills are paying large dividends, it is surely not too much to ask that a few thousand rupees be annually spent on improved, well drained ventilated pucca quarters for the operatives'.¹¹⁸ Regarding the insanitary condition of bustees Mr. F.G. Drury, Civil Surgeon, 24 Parganas stated : 'There is in many places a very excessive overcrowding of houses and the system of drainage in these villages is most defective. The drains not having the correct slope often being filled up with solid and liquid refuse.' He further maintained 'there is no proper water supply. . . the water is obtained either from the river or from impure tank within the villages, most of which are extremely dirty and are little better than large receptacles for the surface drainage of the villages in the midst of which they are situated'. In his opinion 'the most pressing sanitary wants in these villages are—(1) lessening of the overcrowding (2) proper drainage (3) a good water supply and

117. *Ibid.*, 1911, Gen. Misc., 45-49, August 1912.

For such other strikes see Chapters III-V.

118. ARWIFAB 1894, Gen. Misc., 13-34, July 1895.

(4) an efficient system of conservancy'.¹¹⁹ So far as overcrowding is concerned Mr. R. A. Barkar, the Chief Medical Officer noticed as many as five in a low apartment of 6 feet square.¹²⁰ In general these bustees were erected considerably below the road level and the work people had to sleep actually on the ground level which was highly injurious to health, especially in view of the fact that these dwellings of the workers were situated on undrained sites which assumed an extremely deplorable sight during the rainy season.¹²¹

Obviously such insanitary overcrowded dwellings had a very harmful effect on the health of the work people and very often they suffered from cholera, bowel complaints, malaria and other diseases. Mr. R.C. Dutt, officiating Commissioner of Burdwan Division, reported, those employed in the district of Hooghly suffered much from fever and bowel complaints. some fell victims to cholera specially in the bustees belonging to Wellington, Hastings and Victoria Mills. The improved sanitation of these bustees would do much in lowering sickness and mortality among this class of workers.¹²²

Such filthy, insanitary bustees naturally led to outbreak of epidemic and diseases which not only affected the health of the operatives but became a source of danger to the entire town. And it caused concern in the official circle. To Dr. Dutt, Civil Surgeon of 24 Parganas, the question of housing factory workmen was of paramount importance since they lived in over crowded and insanitary bustees especially in the suburbs of Calcutta and proved a veritable source of risk to the life and health of the people living in the city of Calcutta.¹²³

No wonder such a source of danger to the health of the entire town forced the Government to think of its eradication and to urge the owners of factories to make proper arrangements for housing their operatives.¹²⁴ However, the appeal went unheeded by the

119. *Ibid.*, 45-46, July 1895.

120. *Ibid.*, 1-33, August 1893.

121. *Ibid.*, 1902, 92-104, July 1903.

122. *Ibid.*, 1893, 12-13, August 1894.

123. *Ibid.*

124. *Ibid.*, 1898, 17-31, August 1899.

Chambers of Commerce who denied they had any obligation to make proper housing arrangements for the mill operatives. The Chambers of Commerce were of opinion that the millowners should not be expected to improve property not owned by them.¹²⁵ The attention of the municipalities in which the factories were situated was also drawn to the subject but municipal action was slow and imperfect and they could not remove the defects which had arisen owing to a rapidly increasing population. In consequence, the mill operatives, it seemed, were doomed to live in miserable cluster of huts in abominable filthy surroundings.

In course of time however, different mills especially the large ones began to provide coolie lines for the operatives. The motive of the factory owners, it may be mentioned was not at all philanthropic. Obviously with the growth of awareness among the workers they began to express their dislike of the deplorable, inhuman habitation in which they had to live. The mill authorities came to realise that erection of good coolie lines was profitable in the sense that the mill which provided this would always command the best supply of labour.

Notwithstanding the necessity felt for providing good quarters for mill hands, in actual practice such lines were provided only for a small portion of the operatives. Only some of the large mills in 24 Parganas and Burdwan provided coolie lines for the operatives and even these could not make arrangement for the entire workforce. The Commissioner of Presidency Division, remarked in his report that only a small percentage of the operatives were provided coolie lines constructed by the factory owners but the majority herded together in miserable hovels under the worst possible conditions.¹²⁶ For example, Central Jute Mill, which employed 4000 to 5000 hands provided accommodation for 480 only. Union Jute Mill which employed 3,050 hands erected only 34 rooms in line.¹²⁷ Similarly a jute spinning and weaving mill which employed 3000 workers provided rooms for 1,100 workers only.¹²⁸ In coolie lines generally 4 operatives were put up in 1 room and they had to pay 12 annas to Rupee 1 per month as rent.

125. *Ibid.*, 1900, 13-16, July 1901.

126. *Ibid.*, 21-22, July 1901.

127. *Foley's Report on Labour in Bengal*, Appendix.

128. RIFLC 1908. Vol. II, Evidences, Witness No. 105.

So even after the mill owners began to take an interest in providing coolie lines, majority of the operatives continued to live in insanitary bustees. The condition of these bustees, especially, in Howrah, Rishra, Cossipore, Chitpur, Beliaghata continued to be as deplorable as before. Coolies in the majority of the factories in Howrah lived in their own huts and lodging houses. The Magistrate of Howrah remarked, 'The mill operatives in Howrah crowd and pig together in insanitary huts in order to save rent and a number of people stowed away in a small mud hovel is often astonishing'.¹²⁹ Regarding Howrah Jute Mill it was reported that the person investigating the conditions in the bustee where the coolies lived was nearly ill on the way due to extremely insanitary filthy surroundings.¹³⁰

Often it was claimed that the sanitary condition within the factories was much better than the condition surrounding the houses of the operatives. However this was not always true. Mr. C.A. Walsh, Special Inspector of Factories, disclosed that he 'frequently inspected low-roofed workshops, sewing sheds in jute mills and jute sorting sheds etc. in which the temperature was exceedingly high from radiation'.¹³¹

Another practice which was very common but hit the workers hard was to give *sirdars* land near the mill on which they built houses and lodged the operatives working in the mills in return for rent. The *sirdars* naturally tried to exploit the labourers as far as possible by demanding exorbitant rent.

Regarding this miserable condition of living of the workers in India an official delegation of English Trade Unions reported as late as in 1928 : 'We visited the workers' quarters wherever we stayed and had we not seen them we could not have believed that such evil places existed . . . Here is a group of houses in 'lines'—each house consisting of one dark room used for all purposes, living, cooking and sleeping, is 9 feet by 9 feet, with mud walls and loose tiled roof and has a small open compound in front, a corner of which is used as the latrine. There is no ventilation in the living room except by a broken roof or that obtained through the

129. ARWIFAB 1908, Gen. Misc., 53-54, July 1909.

130. *Fole's Report on Labour in Bengal*, 1906 Appendix.

131. ARWIFAB 1900, Gen. Misc., 13-16, July 1901.

entrance door when open. Outside the dwelling is a long narrow channel which receives the waste matter of all description and where flies and other insects abound Outside all the houses on the edge of each side of the strip of land between the lines are exposed gulleys at some places stopped up with garbage, refuse and other waste matter, giving forth horrible smell repellent in the extreme. It is obvious that these gulleys were often used as conveniences especially by children The overcrowding and insanitary condition almost every where prevailing demonstrate the callousness and wanton neglect of their obvious duties by the authorities concerned.¹³²

Accidents. To employers wage labour being nothing but a means of production, the question of the safety of the workers was viewed with utmost disregard. Horrible accidents ending fatally or in loss of some limb of an operative which rendered him unfit for work were very common and these were on the increase. A pet explanation for this was that there was increase in number of factories and number of work people engaged in these concerns. This was only a half truth ; for the fact remains that with a little concern about the safety of workers the machinery could have been provided with enough safeguards to ensure that despite increase in number of factories and work people the number of accidents would be minimised.

The following table will indicate increase in number of accidents in the province of Bengal :¹³³

Year	of accidents Total No.	accidents Severe	accidents Fatal
1892	338	171	—
1894	417	193	19
1898	553	279	28
1900	462	184	25
1902	683	192	33
1904	721	292	28
1906	962	328	34
1909	998	352	44
1910	1268	—	79
1911	1096	436	41

132. Jurgen Kuczynski, *op. cit.*, pp. 222-23.

133. ARWIFAB 1894, 1898, 1900, 1902, 1903, 1905, 1907, 1909, 1910, 1911.

These figures do not include accidents occurring in small factories situated in the vicinity of Calcutta which did not come under the scope of the Act. It appears that between 1892 and 1911 the number of recorded accidents more than tripled. Besides these, there must have been a number of unrecorded accidents. The factors causing such numerous accidents were various like entanglement with moving machines, falling of weight or fall from moving vehicles, inhaling carbonic acid gas, coming in contact with high tension electric cables etc.

Though in the official report it was claimed that dangerous parts of the machines were well fenced, there were instances of total disregard of such safeguards and precautions. In smaller factories, in gins and presses such accidents were more frequent because managers were less trained, machines were less protected and of low standard and the space between the machines too narrow. Sometimes over-exhaustion due to long hours of work, especially during night resulted in severe mutilation of operatives dropping upon moving machines in a sleepy state.¹³⁴

Accidents were very common to children working at cane pressing mills largely due to the want of perforated plates through which to feed the canes, to the revolving cylinders. Mr. C.E. Buckland, Secretary to the Government of Bengal admitted that in the two years, 1891 and 1892 in the Lower Provinces the recorded number of such accidents was 120 of which 6 were fatal besides several others which were not brought to notice. While the Lieutenant Governor did not consider it necessary to introduce legislation, on 'so small a subject', he conceded that if

134. From the report of the Coroner of Bombay it appears that such a horrible accident occurred to a boy, Radho Saitu aged 15 engaged in night work in a bone factory in Bombay. One end of his dhoti was caught by the log wheel which was not adequately guarded, he was carried over the wheel and crushed to death. The deceased had been engaged in the factory from 5 PM in the previous evening to 7 AM on the following morning i.e. for 14 hours including the whole night at which hour he met his death. The jury in his verdict maintained that the machinery was not completely protected and the Collector of Bombay observed that it was impossible for a single set of workers to sustain for any length of time fatiguing exertion carried late into night after working the whole day. Gen. Misc., 63-64, June 1882.

the addition could be made without causing any substantial increase to the cost of machines then they should be provided with perforated plates.¹³⁵ So a little increase in the cost of machine was regarded more important than the lives of the operatives.

Accidents arising from the adjustment of belting to machinery while in motion were quite frequent. The Special Inspector of Factories, Bengal, admitted occurrence of such accidents—4 such in 30 days.¹³⁶ Accidents to children working at the Roving frames in jute mills were frequent mainly because the machine was carelessly started by the man in charge of the machine (commonly called 'Rover') even before the children had finished fixing the flyers. Attention of the Managers was drawn to the frequency of these accidents but no effective guard was provided.¹³⁷

An abnormally high number of fatal and severe accidents also occurred at the 'jute softners' during the year 1909. No fewer than 6 workers had lost their lives and 18 workers had lost their hands or arms.¹³⁸ Even as late as in 1910 Mr. W.R. Gourlay, officiating Secretary, Government of Bengal, regretted the large number of serious and fatal accidents which occurred during the year of which a large percentage was related to jute softening machines. Such accidents resulted in loss of life in 44 instances. The Lieutenant Governor was convinced that the only means of reducing accidents was the use of protective appliances in all machinery the working of which was attended by risk to the life and limbs of the operatives.¹³⁹ However, this was not enforced by law. When at last application of automatic gear was enforced

135. Gen. Misc., 3-21, April 1894.

136. Gen. Misc., 4-12, October 1894.

The Chief Commissioner of Burma drew the attention of the Government of India to the absence of provision in the Indian Factories Act 1881 calculated to prevent the occurrence of accidents arising from the adjustment of belting on machinery while in motion.

The Inspector of Steam boilers and prime movers also suggested that the engine or shafting should be stopped to enable the work to be done safely. But the local Chamber of Commerce was unwilling to adopt this remedy and was opposed to any such legislation—*Ibid.*

137. ARWIFAB 1908, Gen. Misc., 40-66, July 1909.

138. *Ibid.*, 1909, Gen. Misc., 33-86, August 1910.

139. *Ibid.*

by law, it was reported that there had been no accident since April 1911.¹⁴⁰

During 1906-07, there were numerous accidents at Calender machine most frequently resulting in the loss of tips of fingers of the right or left hand. Fitting a small safety roller was recommended but the recommendation was not carried out. As a result the accidents at Calender machines continued to be frequent.

Recommendations made by the Factory Inspectors were hardly implemented. The cruel indifference and callous neglect with which the Managers treated them often led to tragic consequences. At the Victoria Jute Mill such carelessness resulted in a child's clothing being caught by a revolving screw set on the spindle of one of the spinning frames and the child received fatal injuries.¹⁴¹ At the Kamarhati Jute Mill during inspection six cages were found open. The Manager was warned but nothing was done to guard these. A month later a fence was off for repair and the machine was working without it when a worker had his arm torn off. The Sub-divisional Officer of Barrackpore dismissed it as just a technical offence and the Manager was fined a paltry sum of Rs. 5/- only.¹⁴²

Such serious and fatal accidents occurred either because of lack of legal provisions or due to carelessness and utter neglect on the part of the Managers and astonishingly light punishment was meted out to them by the law courts. Mr. C.A. Walsh, wondered why there should be antipathy to fence machinery when guards were generally so inexpensive!¹⁴³

So far as the cotton ginning factories were concerned, the Factory Labour Commission, 1908 observed that these factories were often constructed upon cheapest possible lines, often erected in poorly constructed buildings, machinery and boilers often bought second hand, management unsatisfactory and inefficient and risk of accidents much greater in such factories than in large concerns. The same authority further noted that in cotton presses machines known as "openers" (which were used to clean the

140. *Ibid.*, 1911, Gen. Misc., 28-32, August 1911.

141. *Ibid.*, 1909, Gen. Misc., 49-50, August 1910.

142. *Ibid.*, 1911, Gen. Misc., 27-50, August 1912.

143. *Ibid.*, 1904 Gen. Misc., 4-8, August 1905.

cotton and also to mix the various qualities of cotton) were usually of a very primitive type. This was a constant source of danger to all the operatives in Press houses. In accidents caused by fire at the opener the bewildered and panic stricken women were often the victims. Owing to the extremely dangerous character of the machine the Commission recommended prohibition not only of women but also of children in any part of a press factory. The recommendation however went totally unheeded.¹⁴⁴

Accidents serious and fatal were also caused by moving vehicles or trollies, falling weights, suffocation from inhaling gas, electric shocks etc. The Special Inspector of Factories reported of deaths from carbonic acid gas poisoning in the engine room of the cement works at Ranigunge in 1901.¹⁴⁵ In Albion foundry 6 men were buried alive under a collapsed wall in 1900.¹⁴⁶ On 10 January 1902, a series of accidents occurred in Bengal Iron and Steel Works, Barakar when the roof of a foundry suddenly collapsed causing death of 7 men and injuring 21 others.¹⁴⁷

Accidents were also frequent to infants accompanying their mothers to the mill premises often ending fatally. These proved the falsity of the plea put forward by the mill authorities that infants were allowed into the mill premises because they were safer in the company of their mothers at mill premises than when left alone and uncared for at home.

In coal mines serious accidents resulting in permanent loss of limbs were numerous and most of these accidents were due to sheer indifference of the mining authority to the question of miners' safety. In the early stage of mining operation, the report of such accidents was so grossly neglected that it had been found impossible to formulate reliable statistics with any degree of completeness. After an investigation of the accident at Giridih, Barakar, Asansol and Sitarampore collieries the Chief Inspector came to the conclusion that some of these accidents should not have happened and could have been avoided if the ordinary and clearly necessary precautions had been taken.¹⁴⁸ In one case in a Bengal

144. RIFLC 1908, Vol I.

145. Gen. Misc., B 141-142, January 1901.

146. ARWIFAB 1900, Gen. Misc., 15-36, July 1901.

147. *Ibid.*, 1902, Gen. Misc., 92-104, July 1903.

148. *Report of the Inspection of Mines in India* (henceforth referred to as RIMI) 1896.

Coal Mine Mr. Reader found 250 people (men, women, children and infants) at work where the ventilation was nil, the air was foul in the extreme with smoke and gases and conditions unfit for human existence. He further stated that infants were allowed to be carried and put to sleep in foul places incompatible with health or safety.¹⁴⁹

Even years after the introduction of the Mines Act in 1901 this accusation against the mining authority was repeated again and again. As late as in 1904 the Chief Inspector of Mines awfully reported lamentable neglect of discipline, elementary mining precautions and reasonable supervision in many cases. It was further feared that if this state of things were allowed to continue very serious disasters were inevitable.¹⁵⁰ In his report W.H. Pickering, the Chief Inspector reiterated that the accounts of the accidents showed that in some cases supervision was so lax as to be useless.¹⁵¹ It appeared to the Chief Inspector that what prevented more Indians from flocking to mines for employment was this risk to life.¹⁵² Notwithstanding improvement in mining operation and in the standard of machinery in course of years, accidents in mines went on increasing. Apart from fatal accidents there were numerous other serious accidents involving permanent injuries to limbs.¹⁵³

149. Lovat Fraser, *India under Curzon and After*, London, 1911, p. 328.

150. RCIMI 1904.

151. RCIMI 1906.

152. RIMI 1896.

153. A very serious accident occurred at one of the Kolar Gold Mines in Mysore State on 11 September 1897 causing the loss of 52 lives. In point of number of lives lost, it was perhaps the most serious accident so far. The cause of the accident, it is learnt, was suffocation and exhaustion due to overcrowding of miners on the ladder in the shaft. A large number of human beings collected together blocking the mouth of the shaft, the air became noxious and a mass of almost exhausted human beings were struggling on the ladder in a foul atmosphere. Some fell off the ladder down the shaft and in falling caused others do the same; the dead and dying were stopped by the man-holes from falling further down and this accumulation of human beings blocked up the air passages with the result that 52 men were found to be dead or dying, despite the efforts made, as it was claimed, to release the men and save life-RIMI 1898.

As Indian miners were chiefly farm labourers and were not trained like English miners it was incumbent upon the manager of a mine to engage proper staff of men who would check and enforce general rules and undertake systematic inspection to ensure that life of the workers was not in danger. The owners and managers, however, were not alive to this responsibility and no arrangements were made for observing the provisions of the Act and proper supervision. Punishment for such violation was very insufficient and fines imposed were often so small that these failed to produce a deterrent effect upon the managers. At Jharia colliery the owners and managers failed to report an accident in which a woman working in an unfenced place was killed by a fall of coal. For dual violation of the provision of the Act the owners and manager were convicted and were fined Rs. 30/- only for failing to send the notice and Rs. 100/- for neglecting to fence.¹⁵⁴

Such violation of rules led to a fatal accident at Beguna coal mines in which 3 persons were killed and 4 others injured. After trial and conviction the 4 owners were fined Rs. 400/- each under section 22(1) and Rs. 100/- each under Section 22(3) and the managers and agents were fined Rs. 25/- each. The court directed that out of the fine, if realised, Rs. 400/- should be made over to the relatives of the deceased and the persons injured. It is apparent from the court direction that the fines imposed were not always realised.¹⁵⁵

The foregoing survey of the condition of labour in the factories of Bengal shows that the general features as were typical of the factory system made themselves manifest in India with some specific variations.

The long duration of working hours, monotony of work, army-like discipline enforced by the entrepreneurs and their managers converted the factory into a labour camp.

As in developed capitalist countries the workers in India were a suffering class. In the jute and cotton textile mills, which constituted the main branches of factory industry, working hours lasted from sunrise till sunset, the working day of 15/16 hours

154. RCIMI 1905.

155. *Ibid.*, 1904.

was a common phenomenon. Sometimes in continuous production process (jute presses etc) the working hours lasted for 18 to 19 hours, the same hours as existed in England and France in the period immediately following the Industrial Revolution. Wages, here were abnormally low, and always lagged behind the prices. Miserable slums and horrible accidents were other concomitants of the factory system.

India being a colonial country, sufferings of the workers here were more intense. The methods of oppression common to capitalism combined here in the most inhuman manner with various forms of precapitalist exploitation. For instance, the workers were often the victims of the contractors, bribe takers, the money lenders who treated them as little better than their bond slaves. This dual exploitation made the lot of the Indian workers all the more miserable.

However, as in other developed countries, the factory system served as a melting pot where the workers gradually came to realise their common sufferings. They gradually formed combinations and adopted different forms of protest. They also learnt to make use of the weapon of strike, though such strikes, during the period under review were mainly of a spontaneous and sporadic character.

FACTORY LABOUR AND THE GOVERNMENT

Evolution of Factory Legislation. It is interesting to observe how in framing laws to regulate working condition in factories the Government had to work under conflicting influences leading ultimately to the sacrifice of the workers' interest.

The long working hours of Indian factory hands and unregulated exploitation of female and child labour roused protest in different quarters including England itself. In England industrial interest as represented by Lancashire and Manchester business community and Dundee Chambers of Commerce grew apprehensive of unfair competition and demanded that factories conducted by the subjects of the crown and equally under the control of the Parliament whether in India or in England should be subject to similar conditions and urged the Secretary of State for India for suitable reforms.

In India the factory workers were still unorganised and inarticulate. Moved by sheer cruelty practised upon Indian operatives some philanthropists like S. S. Bengalee of Bombay started an agitation for legislation to regulate the hours of work in Indian factories. Some initial attempts were also being made by persons like N. M. Lokhanday, Chairman of the Mill Hands Association to organise the workers to press their demand for regulation of working hours, weekly holidays etc. In Bengal, some Brahma reformers took up the cause of the factory workers. Their principal objective was social and moral uplift of the workers. Sasi-pada Banerjee's activity among the Baranagar Jute Mill workers deserves mention in this connection. He went to England where he urged introduction of a factory legislation in India in line with the legislation in force in England at that time.

In the meantime, signs of simmering discontent of workers with the condition prevailing in Indian factories were discernible.

To cope with it the Government of India had to take some legislative action with a view to regulating working condition in Indian factories. The progress of it was, however, thwarted by counter pressure from the British capitalists in India who had invested their capital in Indian industries. In order to protect and promote their class interests these British capitalists had already organised themselves into powerful associations, like Indian Jute Mill Association, Bengal Chamber of Commerce etc. These associations vehemently opposed any attempt at legislative interference under the pretext of protecting nascent Indian industries from the jealous competition of Lancashire and Dundee. Budding Indian bourgeoisie who were just entering the field of industrial venture also had formed their own association—the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce and on this question their views were totally identical ; they too registered their strong protest against any attempt at legislative interference. The local government was totally under the influence of these powerful business magnates and singing almost the same tune ; responsible government officials rejected any proposal for legal control as unnecessary, undesirable and harmful. Their combined pressure naturally influenced the policy of the Government of India to a considerable extent. The policy of the Government stands self evident in a Government circular dated 23 June 1892 where it is stated . . . 'The policy of

the Government in working the Factory Act has been to cause the least interference with manufacturing industries.'¹⁵⁶

The issue of factory legislation in India was raised in both Houses of Parliament. Thus opinion was created in favour of legislation for factories in India and the Secretary of State for India drew the attention of the Bombay Government to the grave abuses existing in textile mills and called for legislation. Consequently a Factory Commission was appointed by the Bombay Government in 1875 to inquire into the conditions in textile factories. The very composition of the Commission showed the weight attached to the class of manufacturers since 7 out of 9 members represented the employer class. The Commission during its inquiries found children as young as 5 or 6 years employed in mills ;there was no regulation of the hours of work.¹⁵⁷ However, these findings notwithstanding, the commission was not unanimous on the question of necessity of legislation. What is still more distressing is the fact that the Governor of Bombay refused to take any action in the matter because in his opinion legislation would do more harm than good.

After this rejection by the Bombay Government S.S. Bengalee started an agitation for legislation to regulate the hours of child labour. He drafted a Bill which was rejected by a majority in the Legislative Council. The Lancashire interest once again became active and Lord Shaftsbury moved a motion in the House of Lords in April 1879 where he described the labour condition in India as cruel, oppressive and disgraceful. Against this back-ground the draft Bill of the Government of India based on Mr. Bengalee's draft was introduced in the Central Legislature on 17 October 1879 and was passed into an Act in 1881.

As is to be expected this first Factory Act of 1881 was very limited in its scope. It was applicable only to concerns employing 100 or more labourers, small concerns, gins and presses remaining outside its scope ; it only fixed the minimum and maximum age limit and working hours of child labour while the vast majority of adult male and female labourers remained outside its purview.

156. Gen. Misc., 116-47, November 1908.

157. Proceedings of the Bombay Factory Commission 1875.

Still this Act roused strong protest from the business community here on the ground that this was motivated by Lancashire to injure the infant industries in India. The Lancashire community was no doubt guided by their business motive but there is no denying the fact that the abuses highlighted by them were real as Dr. Nair remarked : 'abuses are abuses whether pointed out by friends or foes'.¹⁵⁸

The shortcomings of the Act of 1881 soon became evident and necessity for its modification was soon felt in different quarters. Mr. Meade King was deputed by the Secretary of State for India to report on the working of the Indian Factories Act. In his report Mr. Meade King pointed out various shortcomings, such as, total omission of all sanitary provisions ; leaving out the small factories from the scope of the Act, where the condition was more miserable ; protecting only children under 12 years and thus allowing others including women to work from sunrise till sunset without a fixed holiday in a week and so on. He also submitted concrete proposals for alterations in certain provisions of the Act.¹⁵⁹

As soon as these suggestions were circulated, there was stiff opposition from Bengal. The Secretary, Bengal Chamber of Commerce representing the business magnates strongly condemned the attempt to extend the provisions to the province of Bengal to bring it at par with Bombay arguing that the condition in factories here was completely different from that in Bombay. In his opinion children in this country reached maturity much faster than in England and at 12 years were quite fit for the light factory work. So he opposed any suggestion to increase the minimum and maximum age limits of child labour or to further reduce their hours of work.¹⁶⁰

Arguing almost on the same line the Commissioner of Burdwan deprecated the introduction of a mass of petty and vexatious provisions and restrictions which gave rise to much discontent among proprietors and managers of factories.¹⁶¹ The Commissioner of

158. RIFLC 1908, Dr. Nair's Minute of Dissent.

159. Gen. Misc., 110-12, September 1882.

160. Gen. Misc., 25, May 1883.

161. *Ibid.*

Police called it 'an act of meddlesome legislation uncalled for in this part of India'.¹⁶² Registering his disapproval the Magistrate, 24 Parganas, referred to the evil effects of "grandmotherly" legislation in England and maintained that India would inevitably suffer at the hands of England if her nascent industries were checked by such vexatious legislative control.¹⁶³ Supporting their viewpoints the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal informed the Government of India that no change was necessary, especially in Bengal and remarked 'any fresh legislation... would have the appearance of imposing unnecessary restriction upon industrial enterprise'.¹⁶⁴ These facts lay bare the attitude of the colonial Government to the question of capitalist-labour relations.

The report submitted by Mr. James Jones, the first permanent Special Inspector in Bombay in 1886-87 giving details of different abuses prevailing in Indian factories again roused protest in England and the question was raised again in the House of Commons in July 1888. In consequence a despatch was sent to the Government of India by the Secretary of State for India (26 July 1888) asking for legislation 'regulating working hours of children and women and granting a compensatory weekly holiday'.¹⁶⁵

This despatch when circulated for opinion again met with strong opposition both from the business and official circles in Bengal. The Inspector of Factories in Calcutta, the Magistrate of 24 Parganas, the Commissioner of Burdwan echoed the views of the manufacturers and observed that there was nothing in the working of the existing Factory Act which called for any amendment in the direction of greater stringency. All of them denied existence of such abuses in the factories of Bengal as alluded to in the despatch.

In view of the sentiments expressed, the Lieutenant Governor informed the Government of India that he did not consider further legislation was required in Bengal nor did he deem it necessary to introduce any change in the arrangement for inspection.¹⁶⁶

162. Gen. Misc. ; 123, September 1882.

163. Gen. Misc. ; 25, May 1883.

164. *Ibid.*

165. Gen. Misc., 26-27, November 1888.

166. Gen. Misc., 19-53, November 1888.

The attempt to modify the Factory Act was thus once again foiled. However, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce did not sit idle, and they petitioned to the Secretary of State for India again in 1888 to bring about uniform legislation in England and India. On March 22, 1889, the textile and factory workers of Lancashire also urged the Secretary of State for India for legislative interference on behalf of their fellow workers in India. They further raised the question of unfair competition which placed the working men in England at a great disadvantage.¹⁶⁷ This added an impetus to the movement for factory legislation in India.

Moreover, Indian workers were steadily growing aware of their appalling condition and the need for its amelioration. Already in September 1884, N. M. Lokhanday, Chairman of the Mill Hands Association assembled the Bombay workers at meetings at different places and drew up a memorandum pleading for an afternoon meal recess, weekly holiday, limiting of working hours, regulation of payment of wages etc. to be presented to the Mullock Commission. On October 24, 1889 workers employed in spinning and weaving mills in Bombay also sent up a petition to the Governor General of India reiterating their previous demands.

Following these developments the Government of India proposed to the Secretary of State for India an amendment to the Factory Act which found his consent. Accordingly, a Bill was prepared and introduced in the Council of the Governor General of India in 1890. The passing of the Bill, however, was no smooth affair. Representative associations of the business community along with the local officials again registered their strong opposition against any such move on the ground that the condition prevailing in Bengal factories was completely different from that in Bombay. The Committee of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce strongly resented the attempt of the Government to create an inquisitorial machinery to compel employers of labour to disclose the most private details of their business like quantity of outturn, value of outturn, value of raw materials etc. which in their opinion amounted to an uncalled for and unjust interference with trade and industry.¹⁶⁸ In the opinion of Mr. G.

167. Ahmad Mukhtar, *Factory Labour in India*, Annamalai University 1930, Ch. II.

168. Gen. Misc., 7-29, April 1890.

Hickie, Secretary, Calcutta Trades Association, the existing age limit of 7 years for children was rather high and as such he considered the Bill both unnecessary and objectionable and hoped that the Lieutenant Governor would recommend its withdrawal.¹⁶⁹ Under such pressure from different sources, the Governor of Bengal informed the Government of India that the proposed measure was not required in Bengal ; and he expressed strong objection to vesting Inspectors with so wide discretion.¹⁷⁰

At this stage the International Labour Conference held at Berlin in 1890 and its recommendations including weekly holidays, fixing 12 years as minimum age for factory children, prohibition of child labour at night, 11 hour day for women and prohibition of night work for them, regular intervals of rest etc. gave fresh impetus to agitation for introduction of similar provisions in India. Questions were again raised in the House of Commons and articles began to appear in the press. Manchester and Lancashire Chambers of Commerce grew restive. In India N. M. Lokhanday organised the workers and on 24 April 1890 ten thousand of them assembled and demanded compulsory closure of mills for a day in a week.¹⁷¹

In the wake of this agitation the Government of India appointed on 25 September 1890 a Factory Labour Commission with Surgeon Major Lethbridge as President to inquire into the conditions prevailing in factories. The Commission carried on investigations and submitted its recommendations. At last the amended Act of 1891 was passed and it came into force with effect from 1 January 1892.

This amended Act of 1891 was of course an improvement on the earlier one. All factories employing 50 persons or more were brought within the purview of the Act and the local Government was empowered to apply the provisions of the Act to factories employing 20 persons or more ; lower and higher limits of age for children were fixed at 9 and 14 respectively and they were not to work more than 7 hours a day and not to be employed at night ; the working hours of women were fixed at 11 hours and night work was prohibited for them ; a midday stoppage of half

¹⁶⁹. *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰. *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹. Ahmad Mukhtar, *op. cit.*

an hour was enjoined ; a weekly holiday was made obligatory and provisions were also made for inspection and penalties for non-compliance. Nevertheless, this Act was far from comprehensive. It did not contain any restriction on the hours of work of adult male who formed almost 75p.c of labour force in India.

Not only was the amended Act of 1891 limited in scope, its provisions were often grossly violated as has been discussed elsewhere. In 1894 the President of the Dundee Chambers of Commerce forwarded to the Secretary of State for India a series of resolutions regarding long hours of work in jute mills and want of adequate and systematic inspection of such factories.¹⁷² When the Government of India drew the attention of the local governments to these resolutions the different chambers of commerce and business associations raised their voice to condemn these resolutions and argued that it would be inequitable to apply to Indian factories the whole of the restrictions which were appropriate for the protection of English mill hands. Sitanath Roy, Honorary Secretary, Bengal National Chamber of Commerce also expressed identical views. He defended night work at Hastings Mill saying that it was not against the law and he considered that amendment of the law relating to labour in mills and factories in this country was neither necessary nor desirable. What still is more astonishing is the fact while C.A. Walsh, the Special Inspector of Factories admitted prevalence of various abuses of the Factory Act in different mills and while he was in favour of imposing further restrictions in the Factory Act, the Governor of Bengal concurred with the business community and his Secretary intimated to the Government of India that no change in the Act was necessary.¹⁷³

The observation made by Lovat Fraser in this connection will help us make our point. Fraser disclosed : 'At the beginning of 1905 the system of factory inspection in India had partly broken down. There was a Factory Act but in certain respects it had become almost a dead letter . . . ' In Calcutta the failure of factory inspection was even more apparent. One Calcutta mill manager frankly admitted that he had taken no notice of the Factory Act. Another manager elsewhere, whose mill employed nearly 400

172. Gen. Misc., 28-32, May 1895.

173. Gen. Misc., 5-17, November 1895.

children actually affirmed that he had never heard of a Factory Act imposing restrictions on child labour.....¹⁷⁴

However the opinion created in different quarters against the long hours of work and such other abuses had its effect. Dundee Chamber again drew the attention of the Lieutenant Governor to the anomalous position created by restriction of working hours in Jute Mills in England and practically unrestricted limitless work in Indian Jute Mills.

In accordance with the suggestions made by the Secretary of State for India it was decided in 1906 to appoint a small committee with Sir H.P. Freer Smith as President to inquire into the condition of factory labour in textile factories in India. The specific points referred to were restriction of working hours of adult males ; granting of prior certificates of age and fitness to children and fixing their minimum age ; necessity of creation of a special class of workers known as 'young persons' between the age of 12 and 14 and also the creation of a separate medical staff of inspectors.¹⁷⁵

The committee visited Bombay, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Madras, Delhi, Agra and some other centres and expressed the view that factory administration was far from satisfactory. They detected various abuses in the existing system especially those relating to the employment of child labour and suggested that these abuses called for drastic and immediate reform.

On the basis of these recommendations the Factory Labour Commission of 1908 was instituted to examine the various suggestions and recommendations made by the Sir Hamilton Free Smith Committee and to investigate the condition of labour in different factories in India. The Commission was composed mostly of representatives of commercial organisations and the Government officials in whom the Government could repose its confidence.

Though it had no reason to be unduly sympathetic to the cause of the mill operatives, the Commission submitted a report which was only too revealing. It unveiled the real condition prevailing in the factory industry. It totally dispelled the illusion so long

174. Lovat Fraser, *op. cit.*, pp. 330-31.

175. Gen. Misc., 1-5, February 1907.

created by the owners of the industries in Bengal that condition in Bengal Jute Mills was completely different from those in Bombay and as such did not call for any further legislation. Contrary to the claims made by the owners, the report of the Commission and the evidences taken by them show that in Bengal there was much dissatisfaction among the workers regarding excessively long working hours in the mills and they were almost unanimous in their demand for shorter hours. There were also instances of workers going on strike on this particular demand.

Surprisingly enough though the Commission made such revealing observations it refrained from recommending any direct legislation for limiting the hours of work of adult male labour on the ground that such legislation would be repugnant to a great majority of capitalists both in India and abroad who had invested or were considering the question of investing money in India. Instead of directly limiting the hours of work of adult males they recommended creation of a class of "young persons" comprising all young adults between the ages of 14 and 17 whose working hours would be limited to 12 hours a day. To maintain parity they suggested that the working hours of female workers should be raised from 11 to 12 and those of children should be reduced from 7 to 6 hours.¹⁷⁶

Only Dr. Nair, Municipal Commissioner of Madras, refrained from signing the majority report and recorded his Minute of Dissent mainly on the question of direct restriction of hours of work of adult males because he believed that 'in absence of effective combination among themselves to act together, with little self confidence and less education' the "theoretical" freedom of Indian mill operatives was very delusive and legislative sanction and official inspection could alone enforce short hours and punish the non-observance of them. He also opposed the proposal to increase the working hours of female labour from 11 to 12 on the ground that it would be a retrograde measure.¹⁷⁷

Refusing to take notice of such glaring abuses as revealed in the report of the Commission, the representatives of the business community and the government officials stuck to their position.

176. RIFLC 1908, Vol II.

177. *Ibid.*, Dr. Nair's Minute of Dissent.

They found no reason to reduce the working hours of children from 7 to 6 and also strongly condemned the provision of introducing the "young person" class which was, according to them wholly unnecessary because of the early maturity of an Indian child.¹⁷⁸ The Chairman of IJMA was strongly critical of the wide powers given to the Inspectors and maintained that it was unreasonable that an owner or manager's view might be overruled by an individual against whom there was no appeal.¹⁷⁹ Most of the owners of the jute and cotton mills expressed similar opinion. On this issue, Indian owners and their association, viz, the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce differed very little from their European counter-parts.

So in the face of this tremendous opposition mainly from the business community and local government the Factory Act of 1911 was introduced. In the final shaping of the Bill, Dr. Nair's Minute of Dissent had some influence no doubt. The Act as finally introduced fixed the working hours of adult males at 12 hours a day. The Act of 1911 was a step forward no doubt, though it was of a halting character and fell far short of expectations. For the first time the working hours of adult males were restricted though these still remained oppressively long ; the exemption granted to the Factories working under the shift system made the provision of 12 hours' work limit almost ineffective.

A reference to the memorial submitted by Scottish Trade Union Congress Parliamentary Committee to the Secretary of State for India may help in understanding the shortcomings of the Factory Act of 1911. In the memorial it was emphasized that the provisions of the proposed Act did not go far enough. It proposed a reduction in the working hours of children to 5, raising their minimum age to 11 and reduction of continuous adult male labour to 5 hours. It also suggested 10 hour day for men and 9 hour day for women. Lastly it was recommended that persons interested directly or indirectly in factories should never be eligible for appointment as Factory Inspectors.¹⁸⁰ Only this last recommendation was adopted by the Select Committee.

178. Gen. Misc., 141-144, November 1908.

179. Gen. Misc., 116-117, January 1910.

180. Ahmad Mukhtar, *op. cit.*, Ch. II.

In course of time the shortcomings of the Act became more and more manifest. Provisions of the Act were still being abused in a large number of mills. Effective inspection of the factories and safety of labourers could not be ensured. These and many other things like improvement of health, housing condition, compulsory primary education of factory children etc. necessitated further legislation to foster the growth of a new generation of workers.¹⁸¹

Mining Legislation. The condition of the workers in the coal mines was even more deplorable. There was no law to regulate the condition of work in the coal mines. Most of the coal mines and all the big collieries were under European management and in most of them the jungle law prevailed.¹⁸² Labourers there were treated with utmost neglect and fatal and serious accidents were very common occurrence. The Factory Act of 1881 as amended in 1891 did not touch the labourers in coal mines, the Government of India having decided not to bring the collieries in the subdivision of Ranigunge within the scope of the Act.¹⁸³

Rapid increase in the number of labourers engaged in Coal Mines, especially women and children, working in extremely insanitary conditions for excessively long hours and the increasing

181. *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission 1916-18.*

182. There are several instances of systematic oppression practised over the miners by the superintendents and agents of the coal mines, especially of the Bengal Coal Company, Ranigunge. We come across such instances where persons are kept confined in dreary dungeons for years until released by death. Ordinarily, however, such cases of brutal oppression did not come to light because the poor miners were afraid of making complaints against their powerful masters. It is interesting to note that on one occasion Mr. Alexander, the Joint Magistrate at Ranigunge convicted one Mr. Lord, the European Superintendent of the Bengal Coal Company for forcibly detaining two workers in a godown. In order to procure evidence, it appears, Mr. Alexander tom-tommed Mr. Lord through Ranigunge inviting every one who considered himself aggrieved by the coal company to come forward as a witness and promising rewards if they should do so. Such extra-ordinary proceedings were deemed necessary since no one dared to complain against such resourceful persons.—*Hindoo Patriot*, January 28, 1860.

183. ARWIFAB 1892, Gen. Misc., 16-17, August 1893.

frequency to serious and fatal accidents led to the appointment of a Mining Inspector in 1893.¹⁸⁴

Reports of inspection of mines revealed the actual condition prevailing there. James Grundy, the Inspector stated in his report for the year ending 1894, that the condition of some of the mines was disgraceful, they were as bad in some parts as it was possible to be. Regarding mining inspection it was stated in the report that inspection report came in most irregularly and late and many were not sent at all. Even the reports of accidents were greatly neglected. He regretted that lives were being lost that might have been saved. In order to compel the mine owners to introduce necessary improvements he pleaded for an Indian Mines Act.¹⁸⁵

When the question of mining legislation was under consideration, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, that jealous guardian of the interest of the business community did not remain idle. In February 1891 a Mines Sub-committee was formed whose duties were to watch the course of legislation and focus commercial opinion upon the many problems which were beginning to emerge. Early in 1892 this Mines Sub-committee became the Indian Mining Association which was the first coal trade association in the country.¹⁸⁶ Obviously the business community was in favour of least legislative interference in their mining activity.

In the face of such opposition the Mining Act of 1901 was introduced. Under the provisions of the Act power was granted to the Government of India for the appointment of a Chief Inspector of Mines and to the local governments for the appointment of Inspectors and other subordinate officers. The Chief Inspector was given the authority to prohibit employment of women and children where condition, in his opinion, was dangerous.

Viewed in the context of total mismanagement and utter neglect of health and safety of miners, a fact which even Lord Curzon, the Viceroy, admitted while introducing the Mines Act,¹⁸⁷ the Act of 1901 was but a skeleton Act as has been aptly described

184. Rajani Kanta Das, *History of Indian Labour Legislation*, Calcutta, 1941, p. 93.

185. RIMI 1894.

186. *Bengal Chamber of Commerce : Centenary Volume (1853-1953)*.

187. Lovat Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 328

by Mr. W.H. Pickering, the Chief Inspector of Mines in India.¹⁸⁸ There was nothing to regulate the condition of employment of workers including women and children or their hours of work. Years after the passing of the Act, violations of the provisions of the law continued, serious and fatal accidents continued to occur and penalty for contravention of the law was so nominal that it hardly proved a deterrent. It appears that for failing to give notice of a serious accident ending fatally in a coal mine the amount of fine imposed was Rs. 10/ only.¹⁸⁹ So the Indian mines continued to present appalling working and living conditions and because the owners of mines put pressure upon the Government, the Government did not take the initiative and no comprehensive legislation was contemplated.

The foregoing discussion reveals that British capital operating in India had the full backing of the local government. British capitalists were hand in gloves with British officials. This made the situation all the more difficult. It is this colonial factor that added a new dimension to the distress and desperation of Indian workers.

188. RCIMI 1904.

189. RCIMI 1907.

3

THE FIRST GENERATION OF WORKERS

The history of the working class movement is the history of its ascent by stages, from a less organised to a more organised struggle. Even before the emergence of capitalist enterprise the working people engaged in diverse activities of the traditional sort were used to forming combinations to resist oppression. It was this heritage which was passed on to their successors, the emerging proletariat, the forms of struggle gradually changed though leading to more advanced forms of struggle, typical of the working class, mainly strikes.

The history of India in the 19th century witnessed formidable peasant rebellions like the Santhal Rebellion (1855), the Indigo Rebellion (1860), the Deccan Riots (1875), the Moplah Rebellion (1885-1900) and so on. Side by side there were combinations of peasants, artisans, and working people of various kinds which took the line of mass passive resistance sometimes leading to total stoppage of work. For instance, in Assam, *mels* or village assemblies were organised to register protest against misgovernment by local rulers. In the face of massive assemblies of this kind the local rulers felt helpless.¹ In Benares powerful demonstrations in the form of sit-ins (*dharnas*) were organised against the East India Company when it decided to levy taxes on houses and estates.² Moreover *Hooka-pani-bandh* (social boycott) was widely prevalent in peasant districts of East and North Bengal. Working people sometimes resorted even to 'strikes'. During the rising of the Pagalpanthis in 1825-26, sympathising with them, the people of Sherpur town, it appears, refused en masse to work for the zamindars. They refused to work on the military road and the strike was so effective that the construction of the military road

1. N. Kaviraj, *Gandhi-Nehru Through Marxist Eyes*, Manisha, 1988, p. 26.

2. *Op. Cit.*

had to be abandoned.³ The report submitted by the Magistrate of Dacca revealed that sometime in 1813 protesting against the imposition of *chowkidary* (Police) tax, labourers of the Company's factory numbering about 400 to 500 struck work and went to the cutchery.⁴

The combination formed by the artisans, specially the weavers is of special interest to us because as a result of the process of deindustrialisation the weavers were the worse affected, they were thrown out of employment and compelled to seek jobs in the newly formed industrial establishments. In fact they joined the ranks of the emerging proletariat bringing into it the legacy of their age old traditions of struggle. The weavers, the most prominent among the artisan class, stood up against various oppressive measures of East India Company.

In inscriptions dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries there is evidence of weavers leaving their places of work in a body when subjected to oppression. This they did presumably as a passive form of protest.⁵

The artisans very often used their caste organisations in the struggle for achieving their demands. Sometime in 1683 there was a strike in Madras against taxes on 'painters' or men who dyed calicos. The whole body left the Company's jurisdiction and threatened to murder any Indian servant of the Company, who would refuse to join them. They also stopped all provisions and goods coming to the town. The Governor and the Council took stern measures and at last it was proclaimed by beat of drum that unless the mutineers delivered themselves up within 10 days all their houses, goods and chattels within the jurisdiction of the Company would be confiscated. The ringleaders were arrested and at once committed to prison.⁶

3. N. Kaviraj, The Pagalpanthis of Mymensing (1825-26), *Problems of National Liberation*, Vol 3, No. 1, pp. 1-8.
4. Govt. of Bengal, Judicial Dept. Progs., 31 July 1813.
5. Chichorov, *India: Economic Development in the 16th-18th Centuries*, Moscow, p. 92.
6. J. Talboys Wheeler, *Early Records of British India: A History of the English Settlement of India*, Calcutta 1878, pp. 78-79.

The weavers of Santipore were said to be of a refractory disposition. As the weavers could earn more by working for others than for the Company's investment they made clothes for private traders and fell into arrears in their deliveries to the Company. The contractor's attempt to check this practice caused violent discontent. So they assembled daily by sound of horn and discussed their grievances among themselves. The discontent spread even to distant *aurangs* where the weavers stopped working for the Company. However punitive measures were taken and seditious leaders' were arrested.⁷

THE EMERGING PROLETARIAT

The growing importance of the city of Calcutta under the aegis of East India Company and influx of British capital resulted in concentration of population and in consequence new forms of city based enterprises and establishments came into being. Workers engaged in these establishments imbibed some urban traits. And in its wake came palki bearers, hackney carriage drivers, who plied in the city and whose service became essential to city life; the *goalahs* (milkmen), *dhobis* (washermen) working as city institutions; coolies employed by railways, docks etc. They formed the emerging proletariat in the condition of an emerging city; no longer peasants but not full-fledged workers either. Such working people, exposed to the vagaries of city life began to organise protest movements against petty acts of oppression by the police and local officials—the most persistent were the protests against the restrictions affecting their trade and behaviour.

As early as on May 21, 1827 the Oriya palki bearers in Calcutta, known as *theeka* bearers refused one and all to carry passengers in their palkis. Their complaints were against a new regulation enjoining them to stick a certain badge which they felt utterly humiliating and also against imposition of a license fee. Moreover, their discontent was growing over a long time because of petty oppression by white passengers. On 25 May all the *theeka* bear-

7. N. K. Sinha, *An Economic History of Bengal* Vol. I, Calcutta 1970, pp. 169-170. For such other instances see Debendra Bijoy Mitra, *Cotton Weavers of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1978, pp. 132-150.

ers of Calcutta formed themselves into a body and unanimously resolved not to bear palkis until the new regulation was withdrawn. It was further agreed that any body who would disregard the agreement should be excommunicated from the community. About a thousand of them gathered together and went directly to the police office urging against the aforesaid regulation. Driven out by the police they assembled in the meadow before the Supreme Court and raised loud clamours. They had also drawn a petition in English to be presented to the Supreme Court. The strike continued for a couple of days. Since palki was the staple conveyance in the city, the strike made a tremendous impact on the daily life of the city dwellers especially the Europeans. Ultimately however, the appearance of some enterprising Hindusthani and Robbani bearers as also the introduction of a new carriage drawn by a pair of horses, dealt a severe blow to the strikers, and eventually the strike was called off.⁸

Sometime in June 1849 the carters (bullock cart drivers) unitedly stopped plying their carts in protest against a new tax imposed on them. The strike affected the inhabitants of Calcutta especially the merchants. The porters too had joined the carters. It appears that about 5000 carters and porters having assembled in a place appealed to the Deputy Governor to exempt them from the tax.⁹ From contemporary reports it appears that sometime in 1838 the syces and grass cutters of Captain Wood's Artillery struck for higher pay. In a body they proceeded to Barrackpore with a view to submitting their complaints to the general officer of the Division. More than 100 of them were ultimately dismissed by the authorities for their involvement in the strike.¹⁰

8. An article in *Hindusthan Standard* by Sakti Ghose, Sunday, 12 April, 1970.

9. It is interesting to note in this connection that the famous British labour leader, O'Brien, in 'Social Reformer' 1849, a journal of progressive labour movement called upon the bakery workers of Britain to unite following the example of the Calcutta workers and he was referring to this strike by carters as a result of which the loading and unloading of ships was totally paralysed.—*Eharat O Samajtantrik GDR*, Vol X, No. 7-8, August/September 1985. An article by Panchanan Saha, pp. 14-16, based on a report in *Sambad Bhaskar*, 26 June 1849.

10. *Asiatic Journal*, July 1838.

2000 *dhobies* from Calcutta and its vicinity held a meeting sometime in 1878 and resolved to increase the rate of washing from Rs. 2/- to Rs. 3/- a hundred pieces in view of the imposition of license tax and high prices of articles.¹¹ It was further reported that the Calcutta washermen had banded together and formed a club following the imposition of an Imperial tax and they framed certain rules for observance and guidance of members.¹² It was indicated in the rules that infraction of any of the above rules would subject the offending members to any fine as the other members might think fit to impose.¹³ It appears from the report that the barbers also like the *dhobies* had formed a combination against imposition of the Imperial tax.

A strike of the milkmen of Calcutta in March 1880 caused much hardship to the people. They resorted to such a course of action protesting against conviction and fining 3 of their members by the Southern Divisional Magistrate for injecting salt into the body of a cow. In view of their strike the Government had to consider the necessity of repealing Act I of 1869.¹⁴

The *bheesties* who used to water roads struck work in June 1891 leaving the roads in a very dirty state. They were enraged because continued rain rendered their services unnecessary and they were discharged earlier that year. A large number of them assembled on the maidan to the north of the Monument in the evening and decided to strike work unless it was agreed upon to pay them for 8 days' work which they had lost.¹⁵ Though working in environs of city life these workers stuck to the old traditional forms of struggle like *bandhs*, social boycott etc based very often on casteist lines.

Another category of emerging proletariat, half-peasants and half-workers were the plantation workers and the workforce employed in mines. In the plantation industries, the workers were reduced to the position of half-slaves. This degradation and ex-

11. *Sulabh Samachar*, 9 November 1878 (RNP).

12. *Shome Prakash*, 10 Agrahayan 1285.

13. *Samachar Chandrika*, 21 November 1878 (RNP).

14. *Ibid.*, 29 March 1880 (RNP).

15. *Indiar Daily News* (henceforth referred to as IDN), 13 June 1891.

treme misery caused much discontent which often burst into open violence.

The workers of the Assam Company, all Assamese villagers working under contractors, struck work in 1848 and gheraoed the Superintendent's office to realise three months' arrear wages. They were able to obtain an assurance against any such default in payment in future.¹⁶

A serious and violent disturbance occurred in October 1859 among the Cacharee coolies in the employ of the Assam Company at the Nazirah and adjoining factories. The incident was marked by a remarkable sense of solidarity. A body of Cacharee coolies belonging to Nazirah station assembled opposite Mr. Mackintosh's bungalow protesting against fining one of the coolies for misbehaviour. They also demanded higher pay and refused to attend work. It was learnt that the Cacharees of Satsooah factories were in league with them and under a preconcerted arrangement they decided to demand a general increase of pay and if not willingly conceded, it was decided to enforce it by physical demonstration. Accordingly, next day, a large body of Cacharee coolies numbering 500 or 600 flocked into the station, many of whom were armed with lathis and they surrounded Mr. Mackintosh vociferously demanding increase of pay. Being much concerned about their movements the authorities sought police help from Sibsagar and the Nazirah Cacharees were turned out of their lines by force before they could be reinforced by those from Satsooah factories. The ringleaders were tried on the spot and were condemned to imprisonment.¹⁷

Coming as they did from the most destitute section of village people, workers in coal mines were subjected to inhuman torture. Exasperated by such inhuman barbarities the mine workers often became riotous and the authorities retaliated by applying brute force. It appears that European Companies employed their own 'lathials' and there were also instances of illegal confinement of

16. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* ICHR, New Delhi 1977, pp. 15-16.

17. Judicial Deptt, 67-68, 1 December 1859.

refractory miners by the authorities of Bengal Coal Company at Ranigunge.¹⁸

At the same time in some large-scale establishments like the Railways and Post and Telegraph Departments the workers were resorting to protest movements which may be regarded as a prelude to industrial action. The movements initiated by this category of the emerging proletariat were marked by some new peculiarities. In place of caste based actions, the actions of this category of workers assumed the form of collective actions embracing different castes and communities. Since workers and employees in these establishments were all recruited from villages and factory life not having developed yet, this category of emerging proletariat, however, retained the vestiges of village life.

Protest movements and even strikes were not uncommon among railway workers employed in different parts of the country. In May 1862 about 1200 railway workmen at Howrah Station struck work demanding 8 hours' work as prevalent in the Locomotive Department instead of 10 hours which they were compelled to do. In consequence, work in the railway station remained suspended for days together.¹⁹ Again in 1867 Indian employees of the East Indian Railway Company were agitating against racial discrimination in railway service and demanded the same privileges regarding leave, absence, pension and promotion as enjoyed by the European servants of the Company.²⁰

Even as early as in 1828 the postal peons employed at the G.P.O. protested against the maltreatment and insults at the hands of the authorities and being desperate they struck work on 6 August 1828.²¹ In 1860 Christian employees in the Electric Telegraph Department contemplated a strike in a body to realise their demands.²²

18. Judicial Deptt., 74-79, 8 December 1859, 39-42, 15 December 1859.

19. *Shome Prakash*, 13 Baisakh 1269, B.S.

20. *National Paper*, 11 September 1867.

21. B. P. Roy, Note on the Early Postal System in Bengal Presidency (1800-1830), *Problems of National Liberation*, Vol 5, No. 1, pp. 47-48.

22. *Hindoo Patriot*, 12 September 1860.

So side by side with the old traditional forms of struggle as waged by the carters, *dhobis* etc. which were based on casteist unions, the workers and employees in larger establishments were gradually shaking off narrow casteist barriers and were combining to protest against oppression and for realisation of their demands. These are early signs of proper industrial action, though of course such actions were still very weak and unorganised. It may be noted in this connection, that sometimes these traditional movements exhibited unusual vigour and power of organisation, e.g. the carters' strike in 1849 or the protest movement by the *dhobis* in 1878. In contrast the strike struggle of the factory workers in this early period seemed to be less effective and less organised.

The point to be emphasized is that these early actions of the emerging proletariat whether waged by the old traditional workers (carters, hackney carriage drivers, *dhobis* etc.) or by the workers in the industrial establishments like Railways or Post Offices, were of a transitioned type, the persons involved being half-peasants and half-workers, in the case of former more peasants than workers and in the case of the latter more workers than peasants. All these actions were spontaneous and sporadic in character.

THE FIRST GENERATION OF WORKERS 1881-1900

With the growth of modern factory industries the factory workers gradually shaped themselves into a distinct category. The concentration of the working class in the cities near the industrial enterprises was an extremely important factor in the formation of the proletariat as a class. Similar working condition in factories and common living conditions made the factory workers feel alike and react in a similar fashion.

Pushed out of their habitual village surroundings the first generation of workers found it extremely difficult to adapt themselves to the uncongenial atmosphere in cities and to rigid factory disciplines. Their nostalgia for village life persisted and the majority of workers maintained their ties with the village. Moreover, in factories the worker became a living appendage to an inanimate mechanism and hence he lost all interest in or attraction to work. The problem of labour turn over and absenteeism which these industries faced at the initial stage and which became a subject of

wide discussion was nothing but an indication of these first generation workers' inability to adapt themselves to this industrial environment.²³ This incongruity violently disturbed the psyche of the workers and had driven them to a state of desperation which often manifested itself in their rowdy behaviour and alcoholism. The lawlessness in the coolie lines caused serious concern in the gentle folk which prompted a philanthropist like Sasipada Banerjee to promote temperance among the workers.

In the earliest phase the protest actions of the workers were mainly of a primitive character like riots, affrays, assaults, physical violence etc.

Though the incidence of machine breaking, an important trend in the history of the early class battles of the proletariat in England was absent here, it had its counterpart in violent outbursts, physical assaults on managers, supervisors of the factories and raids on their bungalows and breaking of furniture. This was the outcome of the 'hazy consciousness' of the early proletariat who could not yet locate the real cause of their misery, which was the capitalist system itself. Instances of such riotous outbursts were many. Only some are mentioned here to indicate this trend among the workers in this early phase.

Mr. Kiddie, Manager of Shyamnagar Jute Mill was physically assaulted by his coolies in July 1888 for having made them work hard.²⁴ In May 1894, J. Whittenbaker, Manager, Indian Patent Stone Company's Work at Narkeldanga alleged that some Indian employees, who had earlier struck work, in a body stopped his carriage while he was being driven to his office and in an aggressive tone demanded payment of their wages. Police was promptly called in. The accused employees were arrested and convicted.²⁵ In April 1895 a mill at Titagarh became the scene of a serious disturbance. The mill-hands on being refused a holiday on the day of Annapurna Puja assaulted the Manager. 2 Police Sub-inspectors and 1 constable who were called to the mill were attacked by them and as a result the police were forced to beat a

23. Margaret Read, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 13, 33.

24. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, (henceforth referred to as ABP), 12 July 1888.

25. IDN, 9, 31 May 1894.

retreat.²⁶ 2 coolies employed in a rope factory at Baranagar brutally assaulted the *sirdar* with lathis causing serious injuries which threatened to prove fatal. It was over a quarrel about the payment of their wages.²⁷ Several coolies in the employ of River Steam Navigation Company, Garden Reach marched in a body to the Company's gate and expressed the desire to go out together. When they were refused, the coolies attacked the durwans and wounded 3 of them. The accused were prosecuted before the Police Magistrate of Alipore.²⁸ At about 6 a.m. on the 4th December 1900 the Kankinara Jute Mill was going to start and the spinners were coming in, when the Manager, Mr. Clark, who was standing outside the spinning room, suddenly found bobbins and weights flying in his direction. One hit him on the forehead causing an injury $\frac{1}{2}$ inch long and he bled profusely. On the day of the incident he kicked and assaulted some of the workers for coming late. The spinners who were being treated like this for long naturally nursed a grudge against the Manager on whom they wreaked their vengeance in this way on that morning.²⁹

A serious riot took place on the 6 August 1900 in the Budge Budge Jute Mill over a dispute between the mill hands and the *sirdars* about their wages. The coolies and their friends and relatives numbering over a hundred forcibly entered the mill compound and assaulted the *sirdars*. Some of the *sirdars* were seriously wounded. 7 of the ring leaders were arrested and sent up for trial.³⁰

A riot of rather serious nature hit Kamarhati Jute Mills on 10 December 1900. As the Assistant Manager, Mr. Banks, was walking down the passage in the spinning room he saw a crowd of spinners standing in a menacing attitude. They started beating him with bobbins. It appears that Mr. Banks' attempt to prevent the spinners from collecting money for supporting the Kankinara

26. *Op. cit.*, 5 April 1895.

27. ABP, 4 January 1896.

28. *The Statesman*, 17 February 1897.

29. *Bengalee*, 15, 18 December 1900.

30. *The Statesman*, 9 August 1900.

Mill riot case infuriated the workers and they made Mr. Banks the butt of their attack.³¹

A murderous attack was made on Mr. Gregory, Manager of the Arathoon Jute Mills in 1902 by a disaffected coolie, named Ram Jan who was dismissed for disobedience of orders.³² Another such assault was made on Mr. Black of Ganges Jute Mill, in the district of Howrah in 1904, by one Khoda Bux, who was beaten by Mr. Black for absence without leave. Mr. Black was struck twice with an iron crow bar and fell down unconscious. Later when the accused was arrested about 600 operatives struck work.³³

Side by side with these early primitive forms of social protest there were also other forms of struggle characteristic of the industrial proletariat. Typical working class actions, such as, strike against long hours of work, against wage cuts, against *sirdars* or supervisors' extortion were increasing in number and the tendency to act collectively was also growing. In the development of the working class movement, the first stage was invariably of a predominantly if not, exclusively economic character everywhere. This proved to be true also in the case of the first generation of working class in our country.

As early as in 1879/80 there was a threat of a strike in Champdani Jute Mill against an attempt by the authorities to introduce a new system of single shift which was unpopular with the workmen. Presumably because of this strike threat the proposed system was ultimately abandoned.³⁴ About 500 weavers of Shyamnagar Jute Factory struck work on 19 December 1881 demanding the dismissal of an oppressive Head *Sirdar* and a Time Keeper.³⁵ Protesting against heavy fines as stipulated in corporation by-laws, tramway workers, it seems organised several small strikes during 1882. In each case only after mediation by the Manager the

31. Judicial, Police, 356-57, January 1901; *Bengalee*, 16, 18 December 1900.

32. Political, Political, B 104-105, October 1902; ABP, 26 September 1902.

33. ARWIFAB 1904, Gen. Misc., 4-18, August 1905.

34. Gen. Misc. 32, April 1882.

35. IDN, 20 December 1881.

men returned to their work.³⁶ In view of the depressed state of cotton trade there was a reduction of 12½ p.c. in the wages of the workhands and in protest against such reduction the workers resorted to strike in different cotton mills.³⁷

During the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries such strike struggle by the factory workers became much more frequent. Low wages which remained almost static inspite of consant increase in prices of necessary articles as also imposition of fines on various pretexts constituted a very common cause of workers' discontent leading to strikes.

Some 500 to 600 native mill hands of Hooghly Jute Mill struck work in a body on 11 November 1892 because their appeal for increase in wages to meet excessive rise in the price of rice was turned down by the mill authorities. Finding others employed in their place the men on strike attempted to force their way into the mill but were refused admittance and police assistance was sought to maintain peace.³⁸

Owing to a reduction in wages the mill hands of the Spinning Department of the Kankinara Jute Mill struck work and threatened those of other departments with dire consequences if they went to work. On 17/18 June 1895 the *Sahib* of the Spinning House refused to pay them salary for three weeks and cut down 4 annas from the pay of each man. Whereupon the coolies remonstrated and there was an exchange of harsh words. They demanded not only restoration of their old rate but also an increase in their wages. Their demand was not accepted. Assuming a threatening attitude the *Sahib* showed pistol and 'talwars' from the upper storey. Undaunted, the coolies numbering over 3000 mustered strong and wanted to retaliate. The police at Naihati having failed to cope with the situation, armed police was brought from Barrackpore. The mill remained closed for 10 days after the riot. 5 of the striking men, alieged to be ring leaders, were arrested. Attempts

36. *Hindoo Patriot*, 28 August 1882.

37. *Report on the Administration of Bengal 1885/86* (National Library) AGAR, Presidency Division 1885-86.

38. IDN, 15, 17 November 1892.

were made by the coolies numbering over 3000 to rescue them by force ; but ultimately their attempt was foiled by the police.³⁹

The workers of the Clive Jute Mills at Garden Reach had been demanding higher wages for sometime and having failed to obtain it struck work in October 1895. Again the police was called in to preserve order.⁴⁰

A small strike occurred in the Champdani Jute Mill in February 1895 where the engine was stopped for 3 days. It appears that the spinning boys first struck work demanding higher wages and the adult hands joined them on the following day.⁴¹ On the same demand for higher rate of wages Indian mill employees of Baranagar Jute Mill struck work on 30 March 1896 and it was alleged that a mill clerk accompanying the Manager was assaulted. As usual police was called in and several arrests were made. The spinners of the North Factory also struck work the day after the riot. On 4 April the strikers of both factories mustered at the mill gate and demanded a few days' wage due to them but were dispersed by the Mill Inspector with the help of the police.⁴² After their petition for increase in wages was rejected by the Manager, several hundred spinners of Budge Budge Jute Mill struck work on 8 June 1896. In spite of the Manager's threat of forfeiting their arrear wages, the spinners continued their strike with determination for more than a week.⁴³ In May 1895 about 500 employees of Empress Cotton Mills at Budge Budge struck work on being refused increased wages. The strikers remained firm in their resolve for days together despite the best efforts of the authorities to induce them to return to work.⁴⁴

Prolonged hours of work in mills without any recess were telling upon the health of the workers which was another main grievance stirring them into action. This was the cause of a serious riot attended with a strike of the mill employees of Sibpur Jute

39. ARWIFAB 1895, Gen. Misc., 21-22, July 1896.

40. *Report on the Administration of Bengal 1895/96* (National Library) IDN, 9 October 1895.

41. Judicial, Police, 6-11, January 1896.

42. IDN, 1, 8, 22, 25 April ; 1 May 1896 ; ABP, 3, 10 April 1896.

43. IDN, 16 June 1896 ; ABP, 13 June 1896.

44. IDN, 4 May 1895 ; ABP 4 May 1895.

Mills on 22 October 1895. The mill hands were compelled to work daily from 5.30 a.m. to 9 p.m. To protest against this the men stopped work at 8 p.m. on 21 evening. In retaliation Mr. Craik, the Foreman of the loom department attempted to deprive the men of an hour's grace as was allowed to them for their meal. This compelled the men to go on strike.⁴⁵ The workmen of the River Steam Navigation Company's dockyard at Metiaburz initiated a general strike on May 28, 1896 owing to an attempt to introduce prolonged hours of work. The strike continued for some days and was very orderly.⁴⁶

Demand for leave and holiday on Hindu and Muslim festive occasions was common among the mill workers of both the communities. From Pratt's Report it appears that on many occasions the workers were successful in making the Managers concede their demands. The Managers' refusal often led to serious disturbances and also strike as had happened in Dunbar, Shyamnagar Cotton Mill, Kamarhati Mills, Baranagar Mills etc. during 1895-96.⁴⁷

Extortion and blackmail by mill *sirdars* very often provoked the workers to combine and protest against such acts of exploitation and when their demand for the dismissal of such oppressive *sirdars* went unheeded they had recourse to further agitation and strikes.

The mill hands employed in the Central Jute Mill, Ghosuri, had a long standing grievance against a *babu* Supervisor and one of the gate durwans. Demanding their dismissal they threatened to go on strike. The Manager's assurance failed to satisfy them and about 400 mill hands struck work in the third week of July 1893 and left the mill in a body. New hands were engaged in their place and police constables were stationed to protect them. Next day the strikers assembled near the mill gate to place their grievance before Mr. D. Yule, the Managing Agent of Andrew Yule and Co. who came to investigate the matter, but at the sight

45. IDN, 26 October, 1, 2, 5 November 1895; ABP, 26 October, 1, 5 November 1895.

46. *Ibid*, 31 May 1896.

47. Judicial, Police, 6-11, January 1896 (Police Supervision in the Riverine Municipalities).

of the Manager by his side, the strikers assumed a threatening attitude. The police intervened and dispersed the crowd, the alleged ring leaders were arrested and prosecuted.⁴⁸

The Ghusuri Cotton Mill also became a scene of strike when on 12 September 1890 some 200 mill hands struck work against alleged ill treatment at the hands of some of the *babus* employed in the mill. They stationed themselves outside the mill premises and assuming a hostile attitude made strenuous efforts to induce other mill hands to join the strike. The Chief Inspector, Samuels reached the spot with a police force and they disappeared. The strike also came to a termination.⁴⁹

Even in this early phase of their movement the workers not only agitated for getting their economic demands fulfilled, they also exhibited their sense of self respect and stood up with determination to defend themselves against the maltreatment meted out to them by their masters. Indeed, they strove hard to win recognition as human beings. It was this that occasioned a disturbance at Kamarhati Jute Mills, Baranagar, on May 19, 1891 when a workman was assaulted by one Mr. Reed, a European employee of the mill. The infuriated workmen, numbering some 3000 struck work and came in a body to assault Mr. Reed. The police was sent for and the mob was dispersed. However, the determination of the workers compelled the Manager to assure the workmen that in future anybody molesting them would be dealt with severely. With this assurance given the men returned to their respective duties.⁵⁰ In 1894 the mill hands employed in the Spinning Department of Shyamnagar Jute Mill resorted to strike because a European struck a coolie.⁵¹ In February/March 1897 protesting against ill treatment by the Manager, the workmen at the Albion Foundry struck work.⁵²

Sometimes the workers exhibited also a sense of fraternisation which was gradually looming up through their confused bursts of anger and protest. 400 weavers of Hooghly Jute Mill, Garden

48. IDN, 20, 24 July 1893.

49. IDN, 14 September 1890 ; ABP, 14 September 1890.

50. IDN, 21 May 1891.

51. Judicial, Police, 6-11, January 1896.

52. *The Statesman*, 5 March 1897.

Reach struck work in the middle of October 1895 protesting against the dismissal of 2 of their numbers and refused to return to work till their demands were met.⁵³ Another such strike occurred on 30 June 1895 at the Howrah Railway Station after some of the chowkidars were suspended following the theft of a bale of silk lying at Howrah goods shed. On that morning the entire body of chowkidars assembled in front of the goods shed and refused to resume duty.⁵⁴ The strike at the Kamarhati Mills during the year 1900 may be referred to in this connection where the strike was caused by the discontented spinners who were discharged for attempting to raise money in support of the Kankinara mill strikers.

There is no doubt about it that there were many other strikes and agitations by the workers of which very little is known. During the year 1895-96 such agitations and strikes by workers belonging to different industries became so frequent that *Amrita Bazar Patrika* commented: 'It would appear that there is just now an epidemic of strikes among mill hands'.⁵⁵ From Pratt Report we come to know about widespread discontent prevailing among the mill hands engaged in different mills in Hooghly and Howrah districts. The managers were always apprehensive because they felt strike may happen any day from quite unforeseen cases.⁵⁶ These early strikes were mostly sporadic in character, unorganised, very often confined to a particular department of a mill involving a limited number of workers and also were of short duration.

Side by side during this early phase there were also instances of more organised, more prolonged strike struggle of the working class extending to the whole factory involving quite a large number of work people.

Some 2000 mill employees of Budge Budge Jute Mill struck work on 2 May 1895 on the ground that the coolie *sirdar* was in the habit of blackmailing the coolies and that the Manager, to whom an appeal was made against this, took no note of the matter.⁵⁷ The first strike terminated soon though the workers'

53. IDN, 14 October 1895, ABP, 14 October 1895.

54. IDN, 2, 24 July 1895; *The Statesman*, 2 July 1895.

55. ABP, 5 May 1895.

56. Judicial, Police, 6-11, January 1896.

discontent did not subside. The workers soon realised that the *sirdars* being a part of the system of exploitation, mere appeal and petition against them would be of no avail and they chose the path of direct action. Accordingly, on 18 June 1895 at about 8 p.m. nearly 7000 aggrieved labourers of the said mill mustered in the vicinity of the bungalow where the European employees of the mill resided. They demanded removal of the extortionate *sirdar* and threatened to strike in case their demand remained unheeded. The mill authorities declining to accede to their prayer they decided to leave the mill in a body and asked payment of their arrear dues. When this also was not complied with, the workers besieged the Manager's bungalow, smashed the panels by pelting stones and brickbats until these were completely dismantled. The Manager and the European assistants fired on them under the pretext of self-defence and seriously wounded 2 of them, who were removed to Alipore Hospital. An armed force appeared on the scene and several arrests were made. Then followed a mockery of trial which dragged on for a considerable length of time and 19 operatives were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. The European employers who betrayed extreme callousness in using fire arms against unarmed workmen were declared not guilty.⁵⁸ Owing to this strike and disturbance the mill was closed for nearly 6 weeks and the company had lost Rs. 80,000.⁵⁹

At Bowreah Cotton Mills, Howrah a serious disturbance occurred in November 1899 followed by stoppage of work. Owing to depression in trade the wages of mill hands were reduced by 10 to 12½ per cent. The reelers generally numbering 380 to 420 resented this reduction and started 'go slow tactics' to press their demand for restoring the old rate of pay. This 'go slow' movement entailed heavy loss to the company and in retaliation for this the Manager refused to pay their October wages till the reeling was brought upto date. The enraged workers stopped work on 18 November. The Manager declared closure of the mill which further infuriated the reelers. As a result, one midday, when the Manager returned

57. IDN, 4, 8 May 1895 ; ABP, 4, 9 May 1895.

58. IDN 21, 28 June ; 9, 13 July 1895 ; ABP 20, 21, 26, 28 June ; 9, 16 July 1895, *The Statesman*, 20 June 1895 ; *Report on the Administration of Bengal*, 1895/96 (National Library).

59. D. H. Buchanan : *op. cit.*, p. 421.

office after lunch a crowd of reelers collected round him and demanding their October pay, assaulted him and his 4 assistants with an iron bar torn from a machine and pelted them with brickbats. The Manager and his party fired from their guns striking some 8 or 10 of the rioters who then dispersed. 16 of the accused were convicted and were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment.⁶⁰

The strike in British Indian Steam Navigation Company in February 1898 was remarkable in the sense that it was the officers who resorted to strike and they displayed a better sense of solidarity, determination and organising ability. From Calcutta the strike spread to all other Indian ports affecting sailings to a great extent and ultimately leading to a general strike. One of the Directors of the Company wished to meet a deputation of the officers and to look into their grievances which they had placed before the Company earlier in a memorial. The officers insisted that all communication must pass through their *guild* and the guild Secretary. The Company declined to recognise either the *guild* or the Secretary who was not a servant of the Company. The officers, however, remained firm in their resolve and a deputation from the *guild* waited on the Company's representatives on the night of 6 February and demanded recognition of the *guild* and full compliance with all the demands of the officers, the alternative being a general strike at all the ports from the next morning at 6 O' clock. Since the demands were not met all the officers struck work on the 7th morning. Some left vessels which were lying at Garden Reach ready to sail that morning, others refused duties at ports.

Following the dismissal of men who refused to join duty a large number of officers left the vessels in Calcutta, Rangoon, Bombay, Colombo and Madras paralysing for the moment the Company's trade in all those centres. In view of the firm stand taken by the strikers, the Company agreed to meet the striking officers in a conference. However, the authorities while agreeing to consider other prayers remained unbending on the question of pay. This failed to satisfy the strikers who continued the strike with greater determination causing tremendous dislocation of trade and com-

60. Political, Police, 22-29, December 1899 ; 48-52 January 1900.

merce. At last the firmness and admirable organising ability of the strikers compelled the authorities to change their uncompromising attitude and to meet the striking officers at the negotiation table.⁶¹ Such organised strikes were, however, a rare phenomenon. While behaving in a typical working class way the first generation sometimes failed to rise above their old-fashioned peasant-like outlook. It is interesting to note that while in most cases Hindu and Muslim workers were making the redress of their various grievances a common cause, there were also occasions when their religious sentiment and community feeling gained the upper hand and there were also cases when communal feeling burst forth in communal outbursts dividing the workers as Hindus and Muslims.

The absence of any open labour market and the system of recruiting mill hands by *sirdars* and jobbers helped to preserve this caste and community feeling because each *sirdar* recruited his hands almost from the same village and often from among people of the same caste. So the line of distinction between the traditional form of struggle and these early industrial actions sometimes became blurred.

About 300 Muslim weavers of Baranagar Jute Mill struck work on 13 March 1894 after they failed to obtain necessary leave to go out of the mill premises at the time of prayer during the Ramjan days. Most of the strikers were dismissed and some of them were convicted.⁶² Not satisfied with the 3 hours' leave which they used to get the Muslim workers of Titagarh Jute Mill demanded a full day leave on Bakr-Id and absented themselves from work. In retaliation the mill authorities deducted their pay for that day and also imposed fines. Provoked by this the Muslim operatives of Titagarh Jute Mill ceased work and held a threatening demonstration in the beginning of April 1895 and also attempted to prevent Hindu workers from attending their duties. Free fighting ensued between the Muslims and the Hindus. Police intervention led to a riot.⁶³ A similar riot accompanied with a strike occurred at the Lower Hooghly Jute Mills towards the end

61. ABP, 10, 17 February 1898.

62. IDN, 27 March ; 7, 17 April ; 1, 21 May 1894.

63. *Ibid*, 5 April 1895 ; ARWIFAB 1895, Gen. Misc. 21-22 July 1896.

of May 1896 because Muslims were not allowed to sacrifice a cow on the Company's premises whereas the *chamars* had been allowed to kill a pig. In consequence the Muslim employees refused to return to duty and they were joined by Muslim workers employed at Upper Hooghly Mill.⁶⁴ Another serious riot broke out on Bakr-Id day in 1900 among the Hindu and Muslim workmen of Gauripur Jute Mill. 33 upcountry Hindu mill hands were charged with rioting and causing grievous hurt to several Muslim mill hands.⁶⁵

Because they lacked proper class awareness, it was easy for the authorities to dismiss the striking work hands and to employ new hands who were readily available owing to the desperately miserable condition of the lower classes. Sometimes upcountry workmen, who were gradually supplanting the Bengalee workers were used by the authorities as strike breakers. These early strikes no doubt did not attain much success. The workers, numerically small, with little class awareness, little organisation and many other shortcomings inherent in their incomplete growth had to face an opponent which was much more organised and which had the full backing of the administration, the police, the army and the law courts. Still these strike struggles were not all in vain.

While the workers engaged in modern industries were increasingly making use of typical working class forms of protest like strikes, collective actions etc., workers carrying on traditional type of work were continuing their struggle in their own traditional form mainly on casteist lines.

Cobblers, a category of traditional type of workers, for example, exhibited a remarkable sense of unity and solidarity. 3000 cobblers employed in different parts of Calcutta had gone out on strike in January 1896 mainly protesting against introduction of machinery in the trade since this had thrown a number of them out of employment, and even those who obtained employment were obliged to work on unremunerative wages. They had formed a *league*, the primary rule of which was that no member was to have anything to do with the finishing of boots partly made by machi-

64. IDN, 28 May 1896 ; ABP, 31 May 1896.

65. *The Statesman*, 3 July 1900.

nery. When a member was found contravening the rules of the *league*, arrangement was made to hold a panchayat or council to take necessary actions against him. The man, however, asked for police protection. In consequence 8 cobblers were arrested and later on released.⁶⁶

In January 1903 the *gowallahs* (milkmen) of Calcutta combined to form a society in view of continued persecution by the Calcutta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for *phuka*. It appears that those *gowallahs* had been meeting each Friday at different places in the town to discuss their problems. A large deputation of the *gowallahs* met the President and the committee members of CSPCA and put forward their demand.⁶⁷

Hackney carriages and carts, the two main systems of transport in the 19th century, played a very important role in the life of the community in Calcutta and its neighbourhood. The owners and drivers of *ticca gharries* and carts were often subjected to severe hardships. In protest against this the drivers very often unitedly stopped plying their carriages causing much inconvenience to the travelling public and affecting the flow of trade and commerce. Their movement naturally roused much concern in different quarters. The indiscretion of the Magistrate, Mr. Marsden, in imposing severe punishment on some carters induced them to strike in June-July 1889 causing heavy loss to Calcutta merchants and inconvenience to the public.⁶⁸ Highhandedness of police constables was responsible for another strike of the *ticca gharrywallahs* at Hooghly and Chinsurah on 9 January 1890.⁶⁹ The travelling public were again inconvenienced in the hot days of summer when the *ticca gharrywallahs* of the town of Serampore resorted to a complete strike on the morning of 22 April 1891 following the high handed action of the Magistrate in shooting some horses supposed to be diseased.⁷⁰ In protest against the order to discontinue the practice of keeping their *gharries* and horses within the station premises when not on hire, the *gharrywallahs*

66. IDN, 8 January 1896 ; ABP, 9, 10 January 1896.

67. IDN, 6 January 1903.

68. ABP, 4 July 1889.

69. IDN, 17 January 1890.

70. *Ibid*, 23 April 1891.

who plied for hire at the Sealdah Railway Station struck work on 16 July 1895 causing much discomfort and inconvenience to railway passengers arriving at Sealdah by train. On being assured by the Station Master and the Government Railway Police that the particular order was meant for temporary removal and not intended to place any permanent restriction, the owners and drivers resumed plying their carriages from the same evening.⁷¹

On 26 February 1896 more than 300 municipal conservancy carters of Mirzapur *gowkhana* struck work. They protested against heavy fines and harsh treatment by the Superintendent of *gowkhana*.⁷² About 200 municipal carters of Entally and Ballygunge struck work on 31 May 1896 because they were asked to perform some extra work. To prevent the strikers from interfering with those engaged in their places police help was sought. The strike continued for more than a week and by June 11 almost all the strikers resumed work except the ringleaders.⁷³

The 'double strike' in Calcutta by the carters and hackney carriage drivers in June 1901 was particularly important since it paralysed the main system of communication of the time and caused serious injury to trade. The carters of Calcutta struck work from the morning of June 8, 1901. From 9 June the hackney carriage drivers followed suit. It was reported that some of the carters were prevented by the strikers from bringing out their carts.⁷⁴ There were also reports of physical assaults and damage to conveyances. On the following day, owing to determined resistance of the carters, the strike became general. Except in some areas around Theatre Road, all the carters of Calcutta joined the strike.⁷⁵ Contrary to the expectation of the authorities, the drivers in the suburbs also refused to ply their carts in Calcutta. Extending their whole hearted support and sympathy to the cause of the Calcutta drivers the carters and hackney carriage drivers of Howrah also struck. Reporting in detail, different

71. IDN, 17 July 1895 ; ABP, 18 July 1895.

72. ABP, 27 February 1896.

73. *Ibid*, 5 June 1896 ; IDN, 2, 11, June, 1896.

74. Judicial, Police, 14-29, December 1901 ; Municipal, Municipal, B 125-126, December 1901.

75. IDN, 10 June, 1901.

newspapers of the time indicated that the strike had caused immense inconvenience to trade and industry and they endeavoured to draw the attention of the Government and the authorities concerned to this incident. Business was practically at a standstill and not a cart was to be seen in the business part of the town, in the thoroughfares, at the jetty yard or in the Howrah Railway goods yard.

The promptness with which the Government proceeded to settle the issue also indicated the magnitude of the dislocation which the strike had caused. Inquiries revealed that their grievances were mainly two—the persecution by the police and the corrupt practices of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The Municipal Magistrate also, it appears, used to impose absurdly heavy fines on the drivers and the occasions for such fines were numerous indeed. The carters and hackney carriage drivers remained firm in their resolve until their grievances were removed. Ultimately on the basis of the assurance given by the Government to inquire into the causes of the strike and the just demands of the drivers, the strike came to an end on 11 June 1901.

This resistance put up by the gharriwallahs of Calcutta and Howrah inspired their fellows in Midnapore, who struck work on 3 July of the same year to voice their protest against prevailing injustice and oppression.⁷⁶ The gharriwallahs of Asansol struck work on 11 October 1903 and for days together all hackney carriages had stopped plying for fare in the town, their main grievances being not getting full fare as prescribed in Municipal Schedule when they drove Europeans and also abuse by the 'Sahibs'. The strike continued for days.⁷⁷

In the period under review the labour movement took varied forms of social protest. While the method characteristic of the industrial proletariat (such as strikes) was steadily gaining ground the old traditional form a struggle (on casteist lines) persisted with great vehemence. There were also occasions when the old and the new remained inextricably interwoven.

76. *Bengalee*, 6 July 1901.

77. IDN, 20 October 1903.

THE WORKING CLASS COMES OF AGE

The formative period, as we have noticed, was marked by a long series of defeats interrupted by a few isolated victories. Still they had their use in the sense that through these strike struggles the working class was undoubtedly growing in consciousness. The beginning of the 20th century saw some new elements emerging in the working class movement which raised the level of the movement to a higher stage ; the working class was gradually coming of age.

Frequency of strike struggles during this period involving a steadily growing mass of the workers marked the transition of the working class movement to a new higher stage. The workers were also assuming more and more determined attitude which made the authorities have recourse to more repression, even employment of military force.

These strikes were mostly economic in character centering on the question of their condition of work, excessively prolonged hours of work, low wage as also inhuman and brutal treatment at the hands of their superiors. What is interesting to note, however, is that during this period some rudiments of political, especially anti imperialist consciousness were looming up. They were responding feebly though to the call of nationalism which was stirring the entire country during the Swadeshi period.

Another notable feature during this phase was the formation of associations and trade unions of the workers who through their experience and repeated failure gradually came to realise that their strength lay in unity and organisation. The appearance of trade unions was a crucially important stage in the development of the labour movement.

Further, workers in some industries especially the more advanced and literate section of them, organised some very widespread and sustained movements which had repercussions over a wide region, sometimes throughout the whole country thus mani-

festing more mature consciousness and also stronger power of organisation of the workers.

The jute industry remaining the main industry of Bengal witnessed a series of labour protests and strikes during this period. Between 1905-08 there was widespread unrest among the jute workers affecting at different times at least 18 out of 37 mills in the province. The mills involved were Naihati, Gauripur, Kankinara, Soorah, Arathoon, Baranagar, Union, Clive, Hooghly, Budge Budge in 24 Parganas, India, Wellington and Hastings in Hooghly district, Sibpur, Delta, National, Belvedere and Fort Gloster in Howrah District.¹

There were so many reasons to provoke the workers to action. Sharp rise in the price of essential commodities while their wages remained static was one of the most important causes of labour discontent of the period, and the workers again and again put forward their demand for increase in their wages. Other long existing grievances like prolonged hours of work, maltreatment by foreign employers, unjustified dismissal of fellow workmen, exploitation by *sirdars* also urged them to stand up and resist. The new spirit of protest and sense of national dignity obviously gave them impetus to be more vocal and to organise and strike with greater determination. Some of the movements no doubt were inspired by prevailing national sentiment. Though gradually the Swadeshi movement was losing its initial vigour after 1908, the workers were still carrying on their struggle. That indicates that the main factor behind the frequency of strikes in this period was economic, though the Swadeshi movement helped to broaden the sweep of the movement and also to heighten its determined character.

Apart from those strikes which were partly political or at least inspired by some national sentiment a number of strikes on purely working class demands were organised by the jute workers.

The demand for increase in wages which was astonishingly low and which remained static for years together led to numerous protest movements and strikes. On 27 November 1906 in Lower Hooghly Mills, Garden Reach, 4000 employees were protesting

1. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

against insufficient payment for night work. Since no action was taken to remove their grievance the men went on strike. The authorities assuming a determined attitude declared a lock out. The workers also maintained their defiant mood and carried on for nearly 4 months when all work in the mill remained suspended.²

The Jute mill hands of Kankinara Jute Mill demanding an increase in their wages struck work on 6 March 1908 and about 7000 to 8000 gathered round the mill premises in a threatening attitude. They broke open two of the gates, rushed into the mill premises armed with lathis and brickbats and caused some damage to the mill. However, with police repression, arrest and intimidation work at the mill was resumed.³

Presumably owing to a dispute over payment of wages more than 4000 mill hands of Badartollah Lower Hooghly Jute Mill stopped work completely in November-December 1910 and the situation turned grave. Ultimately with great difficulty, through intervention of military police the workers were induced to join work and arrangement was made to pay their wages.⁴

On the same issue there were also strikes at the Union Jute Mill, Entally on 12 February 1906⁵, at Naihati Mills on 15 October 1906,⁶ at Arathoon Jute Mill, Dakshindari on 10 February 1908,⁷ at the Briggs Jute Mill in Narcoldanga Road on 30 January 1909⁸ at the Sibpur Jute Mill on 2 April 1909 where the mill was closed indefinitely,⁹ at the Bally Jute Mill on 11 October 1909 where the weavers were ultimately successful in obtaining a little increase in their rates¹⁰ and also at the Hastings Jute Mill Rishra on 18 October 1909.¹¹

2. IDN, 1, 5, 6 December 1906 ; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

3. IDN, 7, 9, 10, 19 March ; 2, 3, 4 July 1908.

4. Ibid, 2 December 1910.

5. Ibid, 16 February 1906.

6. Sumit Sarkar ; *op. cit.*, p. 230.

7. IDN, 12 February 1908.

8. Ibid, 2 February 1909.

9. Ibid, 3, 8 April 1909.

10. ARWIFAB 1909, Gen. Misc., 61-64, August 1910.

11. IDN, 21 October 1909.

Inadequate rates of wages led to a combined protest in Howrah where coolies of 4 Jute mills such as, Hydraulic, Salkea Imperial and Gajadhar mills struck work on 24 October 1910. Such combination of workers belonging to different mills was somewhat unusual during this stage. The authorities having employed non-strikers who were available at hand, the striking mill hands returned to work¹²

Another common demand of the workers was reduction of working hours which continued to be unusually long even after the introduction of Factory Act in 1881 and its amendment in 1891. The situation became worse with the introduction of electric light. It was reported that during the year 1906 many mills were on strike, viz, Hastings, Clive, Wellington, Arathoon, Soorah and upper Hooghly Mills and in some of these discontent was due to excessively long working hours.¹³ The half timers and child labourers who formed a considerable portion of 4000 mill hands employed in upper Hooghly Mills, Garden Reach complained that they were over worked, ill-paid and considerably inconvenienced because the mill opened very early in the morning and closed late at night. They struck work in the last week of January 1908. The strike initiated by the child labourers gradually became general, involving adults as well as children. The work in the mill remained suspended for a few days.¹⁴

High-handed attitude of the European officials and supervisors and ill treatment meted out to workers also provoked them to strike work in protest. The growing national consciousness in the country might have added to their sense of dignity. In October 1905 a strike was occasioned at Gauripur Jute Mill, 24 Parganas by an accidental injury caused to 2 coolies by a European assistant firing his gun at a dog in the direction of the coolie lines. Strikers returned to work only when the assistant concerned was fined and compensation was awarded to the victims.¹⁵

12. IDN, 21 October 1909. For other strikes on the same issue see Chapter II.

13. ARWIFAB 1906, Gen. Misc., 29-34, February 1908.

14. IDN, 3, 4 February 1908. For other strikes against long hours see Chapter II.

15. Home, Public, A 175, June 1906 (Report on the Agitation against the Partition of Bengal).

There were three successive strikes at the India Jute Mill, Serampore, in the course of a single year between July 1906 and July 1907. On one occasion it was alleged that a worker had been kicked and abused for leaving the loom to visit a sick relative. The men were also indignant because they were not allowed to go out even for the purpose of attending the calls of nature. One such strike was against a new system introduced by the Manager under which gates were closed for an hour ten minutes after the whistle to detect late comers.¹⁶

A serious disturbance occurred on 12 January 1909 at Rajganj Jute Mill, Sankrail over an incident in which 2 boys employed in the mill had been, it was alleged, shot by a European mill assistant for some alleged misbehaviour. This roused the indignation of the mill hands who struck work and ran towards the scene of occurrence in an excited state, refusing to return to work till the assailant of the boys was punished.¹⁷ Some 800 coolies of the spinning department in the Gauripur Jute Mill struck work on 5 April 1910 in protest against the unfair treatment meted out to them by a new Spinning Master. In protest against his rough dealing, the men in a body refused to work until the Spinning Master was discharged. Since their demand was not complied with, the mill remained closed for days.¹⁸ The mill authorities' refusal to comply with the mill hands' demand for the dismissal of an oppressive *sirdar* led to a strike of all the men employed in the spinning department of the Delta Jute Mill at Sankrail, Howrah since 25 April 1910 necessitating the closing of the mill.¹⁹

Sense of fraternisation with fellow workers also led to strikes on different occasions. Consequent upon the dismissal of fellow workers there were strikes at Sankrail Jute Mill, Howrah in November 1908,²⁰ at Central Jute Mill, Ghushuri, Howrah on 13 January 1910²¹ and also at Dakshindari Jute Mill on 30 May 1910.²² Consequent upon the dismissal of a mill hand a strike of

16. Gen. Misc., 35-52, August 1907. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

17. IDN, 16, 19 January 1909.

18. IDN, 9 April 1910.

19. *Ibid*, 27 April 1910.

20. Gen. Misc., 53-54, July 1909.

21. IDN, 15, 18 January 1910.

22. *Ibid*, 2, June 1910.

rather serious nature involving the men of the Spinning Department of the Union Jute Mill at Entally occurred on 27 June 1910 and the mill continued to remain closed for several days.²³ Mention may be made of some other strikes during this period, viz, strike of the weavers of Serampore Hastings Mill on 30 September 1907,²⁴ strike at Delta Jute Mill, Sankrail in September 1907, at Beliaghata branch of Baranagar Jute Mill in October 1907²⁵ and also at Arathoon Jute Mill on 19 October 1908.²⁶ On some occasions military police had to intervene to bring the situation under control.

Workers belonging to other industries though not considerable in number were also coming forward and taking part in such strike struggles for redress of their grievances. A serious disturbance leading to a short strike occurred in Bengal Spinning and Manufacturing Cotton Mills at Garden Reach in November December 1906 following an agitation by the men of the Spinning Department who insisted on 3 hours leave instead of 2 hours. On 29 November the men made a noisy outburst and bobbins were hurled about in all directions in the mill. Before any serious damage could be done to the machinery, the mill was closed and the police was called in. On 5 December the men returned to work without 5 ringleaders who were not reinstated.²⁷

The Ghusuri Cotton Mill which had already witnessed agitation and strike by the mill hands more than once, experienced another serious disturbance followed by strike on 28 February 1910. Resenting the restriction imposed upon them, men of the Spinning Department assaulted Mr. Chawala, a Parsi Assistant, beating him up with pieces of mill machinery and then struck work. On 5 March 1910 the strike had practically come to an end when majority of the strikers returned to work.²⁸

Because of the colonial set up prevailing in the country at that time the workers employed in Government and semi-Government

23. *Ibid*, 30 June 1910.

24. ARWIFAB 1907, Gen. Misc., 53-57, July 1908.

25. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

26. IDN, 22 October 1908.

27. *Ibid*, 1, 5, 6 December 1906.

28. *Ibid*, 2, 5, 30 March 1910.

concerns fared no better than their fellow men engaged in private enterprises. The hardships and humiliation suffered by them, urged them to take the path of struggle with determination though great was the risk involved in this unequal struggle against the mighty Government backed by its army, police and machinery of repression. Obviously there was little chance of these struggles attaining success. The Government very often came down heavily upon them with dismissal and conviction of the 'trouble makers' and appointment of new hands in their place. The helpless workers had no choice but to submit. Nevertheless, their determined resistance against such odds was no doubt a significant phenomenon in the development of the working class movement which at times succeeded in wresting from the authorities some concessions or some assurance to redress their long standing grievances.

Their struggle being directed against an alien ⁴ authority the fighting workmen could easily rouse nationalist sympathies which became all the more pronounced during the Swadeshi movement. The nationalist press and the nationalist leaders extended full support to the cause of the striking workmen and raised their voice in condemnation of the Government policy towards its labour force.

A very striking resistance was put up by the workers of the Ordnance factories which were directly under the control of the Government. All work in Cossipore Shell Factory which was administered by the Government of India through the Director General of Ordnance remained suspended from 15 to 18 February 1905 owing to a strike by workmen, numbering about 2,750, caused by a proposal to extend the hours of work by half an hour. On 16 February morning a large number of workmen assembled in front of the factory while their head mistries had an interview with the Superintendent who tried to persuade the workers to join work but without success. The workers remained obdurate and the strike continued. Police precaution was taken. From 18th onward the striking workmen started resuming duties at the new hours prescribed and by 21st almost the entire working force was found at work. But this they did not as a surrender but as a gesture for a compromise. Such a strike in the Government Ammunition Factory naturally evoked much concern and the question

was raised at the meeting of the Bengal Legislative Council on 4 March 1905.²⁹

In the same factory there was trouble again in November 1908 when some of the workmen had been out on strike and the rest out of sympathy with the strikers were working very reluctantly. The authority responded with a general lock-out and closed the factory for 4 days. This however failed to frighten the workers into submission. When the factory was reopened on 1 December majority of the workmen continued to remain absent and showed no sign of returning. In view of the unsympathetic attitude of the Superintendent who refused to meet any of their demands the workers threatened to get their fellow workmen at Ichapore and Dum Dum to join them and thus bring all the work of the Ordnance factories to a stand-still.³⁰ This courage and determination of workers engaged in Ordnance factory directly under the Government undoubtedly indicates how the workers were getting to be conscious of their united strength.

Sometime in September 1907 the workmen of Ichapore Rifle Factory struck work protesting against the degrading practice of personal search which they felt derogatory. This humiliating treatment of Indian workers naturally roused spontaneous nationalist sympathy.³¹

Barisal settlement office clerks went on strike in the last week of November 1905 against an executive order extending their hours of work. The strike lasted for about a month and a half bringing the business of the office to a standstill. Dismissal of 63 clerks created much national resentment. Papers like *Bengalee*, *Daily Hitavadi* condemned in unequivocal terms this barbarous administrative action since the dismissed strikers had very sub-

29. Gen. Misc., 40-41, March 1905 ; ABP, 17 February 1905.

30. IDN, 27 November ; 4 December 1908.

31. *Bengalee*, 18 September 1907 (RNP)

Bengalee urged the rulers to realise that the time had changed and that the people would no more submit to the degrading treatment as they did uncomplainingly in the past.

stantial grievances. The '*New India*' of Bepin Chandra Pal suggested adoption of "Russian methods" of self-defence.³²

The Port and Dock workers also were agitating for the removal of their grievances and for betterment of their service conditions. The most common grievance being inadequate pay and prolonged hours of work. On the question of increase of salaries about 20 godown staff comprising Christians and Indian supervisors, clerks and sirkars, employed in the Port Commissioners' office struck work on 12 November 1905. In view of the increasing volume of work during the past few years, the men demanded overtime allowance ; but their petition was rejected by the Traffic Superintendent. Moreover, 6 men were dismissed on the ground of "refusal of duty". However the strike was of short duration and on the next day the situation became normal.³³

The jetty coolies struck work on 27 November 1907 on the issue of pay and service conditions. The strike was, however, rendered abortive by prompt action taken by the Port Commissioners in replacing the strikers by other departmental coolies.³⁴

In October 1906 orphan Christian lads were employed to avert a strike at the Kidderpore Dock. The strike was organised by the Bengalee Tolly Clerks who had grievances against prolonged hours of work, inadequate wage, non-payment of overtime allowance for working on gazetted holidays, undue favouritism in matters of promotion etc.³⁵

Another big and sustained strike occurred at the Royal Indian Marine Dockyard, Kidderpore on 11 March 1908 when all the Indian workmen, both Hindus and Muslims numbering about 2000 went on strike. In view of ever increasing rise in prices of food stuff, the workmen were praying for an increase in their wages. They submitted petition and gave representation to the authorities. However, the authorities assumed a very unsympathetic

32. *Daily Hitavadi*, 6 January 1906 (RNP)

Bengalee, 10 June 1906 (RNP)

Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-205.

33. IDN, 14, 15 November 1905.

34. *Ibid*, 2 December 1907.

35. *Ibid*, 25 October 1906 ; *Bengalee* 17 December 1906 (RNP).

attitude and threatened the workers with dire consequences, such as, loss of pay and their replacement by new hands. Despite such threats the strike proved to be an organised affair. Regular nightly meetings of the strikers were held. The striking workers could readily secure nationalist support and sympathy against the adamant alien authorities. *Bengalee* highlighting their hardships supported their just demands. It appears that the striking dock workers were members of the labour union presided over by Mr. A. C. Banerjee, who led a fund raising procession of the dock labourers through the streets of South Calcutta. Apart from Mr. A. C. Banerjee, Premtosh Bose and Dr. Sarat Mitter of Anusilan Samiti were concerned about the strike and actively involved in it. The strikers held out over a month. The authorities ultimately had to come down and promise certain concessions. At last on 22 April the strike terminated putting an end to all troubles.³⁶

In protest against police action and trial of one of their number for causing an accident about 100 crane men, all Muslims, employed under the Port Commissioners at the Kidderpore Dock suddenly struck work on 2 October 1910. The authorities promptly secured the services of 30 crane men from the jetties to maintain the work of unloading at the docks. Ultimately the striking crane men resumed work.³⁷ About 200 coolies working on board S S 'Bramfels' suddenly struck work on 26 June 1909 morning following some difference of opinion with the officers. However, after intervention by Inspector Hearne the men resumed work.³⁸

During the first decade of the 20th century the Tramway conductors and drivers often came forward to register their protest. A large number of Tramway conductors held a meeting at Wellington Square and on 3 October 1905 they submitted a petition to the Managing Agent of Calcutta Tramway Company enlisting their demands such as, fixed scale of wages, fixed hours of duty, abolition of unjust fines, some changes in their uniform and boot etc. On 5 October 1905 a large number of Calcutta Tramway conductors stayed away from work and on 6 practically all the

36. IDN, 12 March; 9, 23 April, 1908; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.* pp. 238-39.

37. IDN, 4, 5 October 1910.

38. *Ibid*, 29 June 1909.

conductors refused to perform their duties thus affecting services in five sections. The strike it appears, was attended with some violence and some striking conductors and drivers were charged with assaulting others for not joining the strike. On this ground some were dismissed from service while some others were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. The cause of the striking tramway men evoked national sympathy and Swadeshi leaders like Messrs A. C. Banerjee and A. K. Ghose came forward to defend 2 conductors accused of assaulting a local employee. The men resumed work only on the assurance of an early consideration of their grievances.³⁹ Discontent of the tramway workers did not, however, die down since their petition remained unanswered. Moreover, a number of striking conductors were dismissed from service. Nationalist sympathy was spontaneous and the Anti-Circular Society raised funds for the victimised employees. "Another short strike occurred in the Shyampukur Section of the Calcutta Tramways on 25 October 1905 following an assault on a driver by an assistant of the Executive Engineering Department. The drivers on the entire section went on strike and only after Mr. Martyn's personal intervention the men resumed work."⁴⁰

Workers in the Postal Department who had been agitating for quite sometime by holding meetings and submitting petitions to the authorities to draw their attention to their longstanding grievances were also stimulated into action. Some 200 lower grade employees of the General Post Office staged a short-lived strike on 9 November 1905 when their petition for higher pay was rejected.⁴¹ The grievances of the postal workers remaining unredressed they continued their agitation. A meeting held on 19 April 1908 was attended by a large number of postal clerks and signallers who came forward to ventilate their grievances, such as, non-receipt of cloths in winter and summer consecutively, stringent rules for obtaining leave, non-payment of increment as already sanctioned by the Director General and so on.⁴² By means of these

39. IDN, 10, 20, 25 October ; 2 November 1905 ; 19 April 1906 ; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

40. IDN, 26 October 1905.

41. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

42. IDN, 20 April 1908.

petitions, memorials etc. the postal peons and clerks placed on record their dissatisfaction with the condition of work and they continued agitation to improve their lot keeping their agitation on the whole within the constitutional framework.

Mention may be made of many other strikes organised by the workers employed in different industries. Some of these were imbued with the prevailing nationalist spirit and these being directed mainly against foreign authorities, nationalist sympathy and support was also forthcoming. The clerks employed at the Lipton and Co. struck work on 2 November 1905 in protest against the behaviour of a European overseer.⁴³ In July 1907 some 300 workmen employed in Messrs. Mackintosh Burn and Co. struck work.⁴⁴ In Vulcan Iron Works, in Central Calcutta there was a strike in April 1908.⁴⁵

Side by side with these increasing number of strike struggles by workers engaged in industrial concerns, other sections of the emerging proletariat, more or less engaged in traditional activities were also continuing their protest movements which retained much of old traditional form with some new elements added to it. These may be characterised as transitional type movements.

The ticca gharrywallahs' strike in early part of October 1907 again affected business in the town and caused immense hardship and inconvenience to the general public. The Municipal authorities were compelled to modify the rules regarding their uniforms and this conciliatory attitude brought the strike to an end.⁴⁶ Within the French territory of Chandernagore the hackney carriages were on strike since 23 January 1910 owing to the enhancement of taxes. The strike caused great inconvenience to European and Indian ladies coming to Chandernagore. The strikers were determined to hold out till their grievances were removed. The Governor of Pondicherry had to intervene at last to settle the affairs.⁴⁷

43. IDN, 4 November 1905; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

44. IDN, 17 July 1907.

45. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

46. IDN, 5 October 1907.

47. *Ibid*, 27 January 1910.

A rather serious strike of the gharry-drivers of Calcutta which took a violent turn commenced on 1 September 1910 causing considerable inconvenience and consequent anxiety. The strike was in protest against increased vigilance of the Corporation inspection especially a system of night inspection introduced lately, heavy fines for petty defaults and alleged exaction, and blackmail levied upon them by the agents of SPCA, the police and some of the Inspectors of the Hackney Carriage Department. The day before their strike 2000 to 3000 drivers assembled at a public meeting held at a garden in Narkeldanga Main Road to discuss their problems. On the evening of 1 February after the commencement of the strike, Mr. Simpson, the Registrar of the Hackney Carriage Department visited hackney carriages stables in different centres of the town, assisted by the police to explain to the owners serious consequences of the strike. This attempt to turn out some carriages annoyed the strikers and led to widespread violence, intimidation and smashing of cars in several areas like Manicktala, Sealdah, Taltala, and Bhowanipore. Public sympathy was also roused. The Sealdah railway station premises usually crowded daily with gharrywallahs were practically deserted. The situation was so tense that hardly any carriage was to be seen on the next day and at the time of the arrival of mail trains no *ticca gharry* could be found at the Howrah Railway Station. The strike, it seems was well organised.⁴⁸

Conservancy coolies and road sweepers, contemptuously called *dhangars*, remarkably displayed their spirit of protest and resistance. Quite often did they give proof of their admirable power of organisation and in view of their socially important services the illiterate and ignorant mass of coolies sometimes succeeded in compelling the arrogant authorities to concede some of their demands. In October 1905 the road sweeping coolies launched a very organised movement against inadequate pay. In some of the wards of Districts I and II they refused to receive their usual pay of Rs. 7-8 a month which they complained was quite inadequate. A slight increase in their pay to Rs. 8/- failed to satisfy them. On the pay day about 2000 road sweeping coolies, one by

48. *Ibid*, 2, 3, 5 September 1910.

one without exception, declined to receive Rs. 8/- and demanded Rs. 10/- instead. Though they declined to accept their pay they were doing their work as usual.⁴⁹ A novel kind of protest, this was intended to put moral pressure upon the authorities to accept their demand. On the same demand for increased pay sweepers, *mehtars* and others in the employ of Calcutta Corporation, about 2000 in number belonging to wards 1 to 17 struck work since 20 August 1906. It caused much inconvenience to the residents of the town. They demanded that their wages should be raised from Rs. 8/- to Rs. 12/- which the Corporation authorities refused to concede. The Municipal authorities began to employ new hands in place of the strikers. The District Engineer at last succeeded in persuading several of the strikers to resume work. That hastened the culmination of the strike.⁵⁰

Not receiving any grain compensation allowance some 200 or 300 sweepers and coolies of Garden Reach Municipality struck work on 22 December 1906.⁵¹ Owing to sudden stoppage of grain allowance of 1 Re per month over 1000 sweepers, carters and other men of Conservancy Department of the Howrah Municipality went on strike on 18 February 1907. The men assembled at Howrah Maidan to discuss the terms and resumed work the next day.⁵²

Steep rise in prices of food grains and other essential goods led to many other strikes on purely economic issues during 1906-07. 2000 Oriya coolies employed by import houses struck work in the last week of April 1906 demanding a rise in their pay rate.⁵³ Messrs. Bird and Company's coolies at the Government Salt Golah had gone on strike on December 1907.⁵⁴ Demanding grain compensation allowance Municipal sweeper coolies of Calcutta Corporation struck work again on 20 May 1910. Large scale arrest of strikers could not deter them from action and majority of them continued to hold out. About 1000 coolies from Districts

49. *Ibid*, 26 October 1905.

50. *Ibid*, 22 August 1906.

51. *Ibid*, 25 December 1906.

52. *Ibid*, 19, 20 February 1907.

53. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 205.

54. IDN, 3 December 1907.

I and II gathered in front of the Central Municipal Office Buildings to make a representation to the Chairman about the hardship caused to them by the discontinuance of the grain allowance. Only some assurance of sympathetic consideration of the question induced them to return to work.⁵⁵ About 200 *dandies* in the employ of Port Commissioners went on strike on 1 March 1910 demanding an increase in their pay.⁵⁶

Judging by the number of protests of varying duration, their steadily increasing capacity for organisation and the rising level of their consciousness it may be assumed that during the first decade of the 20th century the working class of Bengal had made some headway.

If may be noted, however, that owing to the incomplete nature of industrialisation in India the working class was incapable yet of giving up completely its primordial loyalties to religion, caste, community etc. Still at times religion acted as a divisive force creating tension among Hindu and Muslim workers sometimes resulting even in communal outbursts. For example, the Muslim workers of the Sibpur Jute Mill, Howrah struck work on 18 November 1908 owing to a dispute over the building of a mosque on the bustee land. The strike continued for about a week.⁵⁷ A communal flare up among the workers took a very serious turn resulting in widespread disturbance and strike by mill hands in different mills covering a very large area. The Muslim mill hands of Titagarh were found in a state of frenzy on Bakr Id day, 4 January 1909 owing to desecration of a mosque. The disturbances spread to Kamarhati, Garden Reach and to Arathoon and Union Jute Mills in Beliaghata, to Baranagar and Clive Jute Mills. There was also strike at Naihati and Sankrail Mills and the mill hands at Sibpur and Howrah were very much infuriated. It shows that a communal issue could still create such a serious tension among the workers of a particular community over a very wide region.⁵⁸

55. *Ibid*, 21, 25, 26 May 1910.

56. *Ibid*, 2 March 1910.

57. *Ibid*, 21, 25 November 1908.

ARWIFAB 1908, Gen. Misc., 53-54, July 1909.

58. IDN, 5, 6, 7 January 1909.

In jute mills Bengali mill hands were being supplanted by up-country hands and in course of time this became a source of irritation to the Bengali workers. In January 1908, local Bengali hands of Belvedere Jute Mill struck work in protest against the employment of up-country labour.⁵⁹

Compared to their powerful adversaries, the workers were still not strong enough to achieve success in their struggle except on a very few occasions. In the absence of class consciousness proper and because of economic distress new hands were readily available who could be used by the employers to dismiss the striking workmen who had no legal protection against such arbitrary dismissals.

THE STRIKE MOVEMENT RISES TO A NEW HEIGHT

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the main line of development was in a progressive direction. The working class by waging a number of formidable country-wide strike struggles (e.g. in Press, Telegraph, Railways etc.) was demanding public recognition as an emerging factor in the social and political life of the country.

The Swadeshi movement added a new momentum to the rising working class movement. During the period there was a spate of demonstrations and strike struggle of workers belonging to different industries and this spirit of protest permeated all sections of workers with the literate section of workers playing a very prominent part in it.

Press Strike of 1905. In 1905 Bengali compositors and pressmen of both Government of India Central Press and Bengal Secretariat Press resorted to a sustained movement which had great repercussions.

Protesting against the injustice of the alien rulers they were no doubt inspired by the nationalist spirit which then filled the air. Prominent leaders of the Swadeshi movement extended their full support to the cause of the striking employees. The facts of the movement however indicate that the struggle of the press employees

was the outcome of their long-standing grievances against the high handed measures and unsympathetic attitude of their superior officers.

Maulvi Syed Muhammad Karim Agha, Secretary, Mohamadan Defence Association indicated that his committee did not think the grievances of the pressmen were a figment of imagination. Since the officials of the press smelt 'Bengali agitation' in every thing, he felt, it would be difficult for them to make any settlement of the issue. He urged Mr. Hewett to hold an independent inquiry to find out real state of things because he was afraid there was something wrong in the state of affairs.⁶⁰

The employees of the Government of India Central Press had for some time past been complaining of certain grievances such as, inadequate pay, fines, prolonged hours of work, high handed attitude of their superiors etc. They had presented petitions from time to time sometimes individually and sometimes collectively but to no avail. In September, just before the Pujas when they were not paid their dues as usual, a number of compositors refused work on the evening of 21 September and intended to go to Surendra Nath Banerjee to seek his intervention.⁶¹ On 23 September at 2 O'clock a meeting was held on the maidan after giving due notices in vernacular. The meeting was attended by a number of barristers. It was resolved that they should submit a joint petition setting out their various grievances, such as, insufficient supply of material, delay in payment for work, harsh rules regarding holidays, leave, late attendance, medical certificate, stringency of rules for promotion in case of pensionable staff, harsh treatment in general and corruption and so on.⁶² The men also demanded removal of 2 unpopular foremen and the Head Accountant whose oppressive ways had exasperated them. Another petition was submitted by compositors of the Dharamtala press complaining of the conduct of the foreman there and of his assistant and intimating their decision to refuse work until these 2 men were removed.⁶³

60. GOI, Deptt. of Commerce and Industry, B 60, March 1906.

61. *Ibid*, 66, March 1906.

62. *Ibid*, Appendix B, 12, March 1906.

63. *Ibid*, B 9, March 1906.

Having obtained no satisfactory response the men of the Dharamtala Branch of the Government of India Press struck work on 26 September at 2 PM which was followed by another strike at the Hastings Street Branch and in consequence a lockout was declared at both the offices on 27 September.⁶⁴ The employees of the Bengal Secretariat Press also submitted to their Superintendent Mr. Chamars an ultimatum to the effect that if their grievances were not redressed, they would stop work. Having failed to obtain any assurance the men refused to work on 26 September and about 1000 compositors gathered at the Writers' Buildings end of Dalhousie Square and were dispersed only with the help of police.⁶⁵ In view of their determined attitude the Superintendent decided to declare lockout in the Press.

Simultaneously with this strike and lockout in Government of India Central Press and Bengal Secretariat Press discontent was growing among the Indian employees of Messrs. Thackers Spink and Co's press over certain rules and regulations lately enforced.⁶⁶ The Home Department was informed by the Department of Commerce and Industry of this widespread disaffection among the employees of all Government and private presses and requested to hold over matters which were not urgent since it would be useless to send work there.⁶⁷

In view of this total dislocation of press work Mr. Cox, Comptroller General and Mr. Rainey, Under Secretary, Finance Department had to intervene in the affairs of the Government of India Press and Bengal Secretariat Press respectively and thanks to their efforts, the lockout was lifted, gates were opened and the work in the press became normal.⁶⁸

However, when in the beginning of October, 7 men were summarily dismissed in the Government of India Central Press for taking part in the meeting of the employees, the situation again became tense. This action of dismissal by Mr. Cogswell forced the

64. *Ibid.*

65. IDN, 27 September 1905.

66. *Ibid.*, 26 September 1905.

67. GOI, Home, Public, B 275-283, October 1905.

68. GOI, Commerce and Industry, B 55-72, March 1906.

employees of the Government of India Press to go on strike again.⁶⁹ Storm was gathering in Bengal Secretariat Press too, where under the orders from Mr. Rainey 3 ringleaders of the strike were dismissed and together with them names of a large number of men who had been absent during the strike had been struck off the rolls.⁷⁰

So after the Pujas the men returned to work with a feeling of great discontent. A meeting was held on 18 October at 14 Cornwallis Street which was attended by 200 to 300 employees of Government of India Press. Also present were Premtosh Bose, A. K. Ghose, Suresh Chandra Samajpati, Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, Shyam Sundar Chakravarty and others. It was learnt that Surendra Nath Banerjee as also the Maharaja of Natore and Mymensingh were taking much interest in their affairs and a large sum was being collected to support the pressmen. It was unanimously resolved that an ultimatum should be presented to the Superintendent to the effect that if the seven dismissed men were not taken back immediately they would one and all strike work.⁷¹

Since the authorities refused to take back the dismissed men they all shouted "*Bandemataram*" and a meeting was held on 21 October of about 1000 compositors, readers, section holders etc. and it was attended by the nationalist leaders, Bepin Chandra Pal being in the chair.⁷² The compositors one and all agreed to go on strike. They also urged upon the compositors of Thackers

69. *Ibid*, 31, March 1906.

70. IDN 6, 7 October 1905.

71. GOI, Commerce and Industry, Appendix B, March 1906 ; IDN, 21 October 1905.

72. A printed notice of the said meeting which was distributed with much secrecy to rouse the spirit of the pressmen began with the following lines :

BANDEMATARAM

"Dive on and on in ocean, climb up and up in hills

Go up and up in regions of stars

Fear not, ye ! wind or water

Lightening or thunder

Move on and on to gain the Day !"

—GOI, Commerce and Industry, Appendix B, March 1906.

Spink to refuse any work given to them by the Government. Anticipating a strike the Government declared lockout in the Government of India Press. In the following morning the employees as was expected struck work.⁷³ In the Bengal Secretariat Press on 23rd afternoon some of the compositors refused to compose certain matter belonging to the Government of India Press, when the Superintendent tried to exert pressure the men refused and in a body they marched out.⁷⁴ Then a meeting of about 1500 compositors, section holders, readers etc. of both the India and Bengal Secretariat Press was held on 23 October evening which was attended by the nationalist leaders. Monoranjan Guha, a zamindar and reformer of Barisal was proposed to the chair by A. K. Ghose. All the Bengali press compositors agreed not to attend office.⁷⁵

In a telegram from Calcutta to Simla on 23 October it was informed that the press was entirely closed owing to a strike and that the gazette would have to be printed at Simla. Mr. Rainey's efforts to induce the men to join work proved of no avail. The strike in the Government of India Press and in Bengal Secretariat Press continued. It was also learnt that they had formed a union of printers, compositors, pressmen, builders etc. at a meeting at College Square on 21 October and A. K. Ghose and B. Upadhyay were made two honorary Secretaries.⁷⁶ A notice for holding a workers' meeting was put up at the Bengal Secretariat Press which called for boycott of foreign articles. In a secret meeting of the proprietors of local Indian presses held on 25 October editors of *Sandhya*, *Sanjibani*, *Indian Mirror* and others heartily agreed to help the striking pressmen.⁷⁷

In order to find a way out Mr. J. P. Hewett of the Department of Commerce and Industry had to intervene and after examining their grievances made some recommendations conceding some of the demands in relation to their condition of work, overtime

73. GOI, Commerce and Industry, B 51, March 1906.

74. IDN, 24, 27, October 1905.

75. GOI, Commerce and Industry, 54, March 1906.

76. GOI, Home, Public, B 275-283, October 1905 ; Commerce and Industry, Appendix A, March 1906 ; IDN, 25 October 1905.

77. GOI, Commerce and Industry, Appendix A, March 1906.

allowance, fine, leave etc.⁷⁸ Against this background a meeting was held on 14 November, which was attended by about 500 men belonging to both Bengal Secretariat and Central Press to consider the order passed by Mr. Hewett. Nationalist leaders like A. K. Ghose, Roy Chowdhury, Abul Hussain, Charu Chandra Mitra and others were also present. The pressmen, however, were reluctant to join work because the concessions, they felt were not substantial and more importantly because no order had been passed for the reinstatement of 7 dismissed men.⁷⁹ Next day another meeting was held and after much deliberations the men agreed to join work. At the same time it was resolved that every one should contribute a sum in proportion to his salary for the purpose of making a permanent provision for the 7 dismissed men.⁸⁰

In the history of the working class movement in India the press strike of 1905 made its mark. It is true that the striking pressmen could not achieve redress of all their grievances and discontent continued especially at the Bengal Secretariat Press leading to another 45 point memorial in March 1906.⁸¹ Still the fact cannot be ignored that this prolonged struggle by the compositors and printers assumed the character of a general strike. Their determined struggle against the Government notwithstanding all its resources and power of repression, caused much concern in the higher level of administration and compelled them to give up their natural apathy and to make some important concessions.

The strike also brought into relief the growing trade union consciousness of the workers as was manifest in the formation of the Printers' Union which gradually extended its sphere of activity to private presses and it seems that workers in all the big presses in Calcutta including Eastern Bengal State Railway, Edinburgh, Clive, Baptist Mission, Methodist, The Statesman and Bengal Printing Presses had joined the organisation. The Union also took the initiative in organising numerous strikes during 1906

78. IDN, 31 October 1905.

79. *Ibid*, 16 November 1905.

80. *Ibid*, 17 November 1905.

81. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

affecting no fewer than 6 private presses and the Bengal Secretariat Press.⁸² It also appears that a large number of Printers' Union men participated in the Swadeshi procession on 7 August to College Square which otherwise consisted mainly of students.⁸³ All this testifies to the growing political consciousness of the workers particularly the literate sections.

The Telegraph Strike of 1908. During the first decade of the 20th century a determined strike by Anglo Indian Signalling Staff and also Indian peons belonging to the Telegraph Department turned out to be a very serious affair causing much inconvenience to the general public and affecting trade and commerce to a great extent.

For some time the discontented Anglo Indian Signalling Staff and Telegraph Masters were holding meetings and even submitting memorials to the authorities embodying their grievances.⁸⁴ At the suggestion of Mr. Barton of Rangoon they agreed to form a union for the subordinate Telegraph Establishment and elected him as the General Secretary.⁸⁵ The Telegraph authorities considered this course of action on the part of the subordinate staff as an act of insubordination and in retaliation Mr. Barton, General Secretary of the Memorial Committee was transferred to Berhampore, a very unhealthy place to live in. This created great indignation among the signallers and this action was strongly disapproved at meetings held at Mandalay and also at Calcutta.⁸⁶ At the Calcutta meeting which was largely attended, the name of the Union was changed to Indian Telegraph Association and a song of the Association was composed which indicated their firm determination to improve their lot through the collective strength of the Union. However, they wanted to stick to the constitutional line of agitation. Different local Signallers' Unions formed by that

82. *Op. Cit.*, p. 211.

83. *Op. Cit.*, p. 213.

84. It is interesting to note that as early as in 1860 a correspondent of the *Englishman* reported that the Christian employees in the Electric Telegraph Department were contemplating a strike in a body—*Hindoo Patriot*, 12 September 1860.

85. IDN, 10 December 1907.

86. *Ibid*, 5 February 1908.

time pledged to support the action of the Central Committee of the said association.⁸⁷

In the meantime Mr. Barton submitted his resignation in protest and it was readily accepted. This created bitter indignation among the telegraph staff. Discontent was further aggravated by the introduction of a new system of watch by Mr. Newland, the English expert, which required the telegraph staff to work all night and sleep all day. To register their protest against this new system of watch the central branch of Indian Telegraph Association comprising the entire signalling establishment marched to the office of the Director General on 2 March 1908 but his disinclination to meet them destroyed the chance of an amicable settlement.⁸⁸

Since the new duties about to be introduced were in contravention of the Traffic Code, it was condemned in various meetings held at Rangoon, Bombay and Madras.⁸⁹ Their appeals to the Director General having failed to evoke any sympathy telegrams from Calcutta and other principal centres were sent to the private secretary of the Viceroy and the members of the Commerce and Industry Department drawing their attention to the unrest existing among the employees and earnestly praying for the postponement of the new system.⁹⁰ However, with utter indifference to their appeals the new system was introduced and the result was disastrous. The signallers smarting under a sense of disappointment adopted an attitude of indifference and in consequence work in the Telegraph Department in Calcutta and other centres throughout India and Burma was thrown into a state of wild confusion. A large number of men having reported sick, piles of telegrams had accumulated. The Director General issued orders to suspend and convict any operator found guilty of deliberately going slow. The Telegraph Department went on suspending signallers on charge of obstructing work and the men on the other hand re-

87. *Ibid*, 10, 11 February 1908.

88. *Ibid*, 3 March 1908.

89. *Ibid*, 27 March 1908.

90. *Ibid*, 31 March 1908.

mained totally unmoved and Indian and foreign messages accumulated thick and fast.⁹¹

Such intimidation and threat notwithstanding, the signallers continued their agitation with stubborn determination. On 7 April no fewer than 8000 messages were reported to be lying at Calcutta undespached ; at Agra the number of such undespached messages was not fewer than 6000 and the number would not fall far short of 30,000 at Kanpur, Bombay, Rangoon and other stations. Foreign messages to Europe and America were also much delayed.⁹² At this moment, an extra ordinary notice issued by the Director General, Telegraph Department, to dismiss summarily 10 p.c. of the staff at Calcutta, Bombay, Agra, Rangoon, and Karachi offices where obstruction was most noticeable and to replace them if necessary by postal signallers, precipitated the strike. The Anglo Indian press described the notice as a "blunder of quite extraordinary stupidity". After the notice was issued a number of signallers and telegraph masters were summarily dismissed at Rangoon, Bombay and Calcutta.⁹³

In consequence all the signalling staff at the different centres in Burma went on strike on 8 April at 9 p.m. and it was resolved unanimously at an extraordinary meeting to stay away from duty till the dismissed men were reinstated and all such action against other members was withdrawn.⁹⁴ The strike that commenced at Burma spread to most of the great centres in India. In Calcutta a large number of signalling staff of the Government Telegraph Department went on strike from 3 O'clock on 9 April after a largely attended meeting at the Telegraph Club. Only senior men were advised not to join since they would lose all claims to pension.⁹⁵ On that day in the afternoon it was reported the strike had spread to Bombay, Karachi, Lahore, Lucknow, Allahabad, Agra, Bankipore and other centres on receipt of the signal "Diabolical 15" which was flashed from the headquarters in Calcutta.

91. *Ibid*, 3 April 1908.

92. *Ibid*, 8 April 1908.

93. *Ibid*, 8 April 1908.

94. *Ibid*, 9 April 1908.

95. *Ibid*, 10 April 1908.

It proved to be a widespread strike which was well organised and which brought the telegraph service temporarily to a standstill.⁹⁶ In spite of the authorities' threat of dismissal the succeeding shifts swelled the ranks of the strikers. Some black legs recruited for the purpose created more confusion than assisting the authorities in improving the telegraph service.

With the strike of the signallers growing more and more acute the authorities came down heavily upon the strikers with more drastic measures, summarily dismissing all absentees from service among whom were several senior men with service extending from 15 to 27 years including the President, the Secretary and members of the Calcutta Branch of Indian Telegraph Association. This was interpreted as an attempt to stifle the Indian Telegraph Association and it added to the indignation of the men on strike. Furthermore the locking up of the club room under the orders of Mr. Henderson only strengthened the determination of the striking men who unanimously resolved to continue the strike.⁹⁷ Since almost the entire staff struck work in Bombay the situation seemed like a general strike and the total number of strikers rose to 1000. They remained firm in their resolve to continue the strike unless all the dismissed men were reinstated. At Agra also the work was practically at a standstill where 14 persons were dismissed including the branch secretary of the Telegraph Association.

In order to find some way out of the total dislocation in the Telegraph Service, Mr. Berrington, Director General, Telephones, Mr. Newlands, Traffic expert and Mr. Harvey of the Department of Commerce and Industry arrived in Calcutta and met the representatives of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, which had, in view of total dislocation of trade and commerce, demanded formation of a Conciliation Board for the settlement of the dispute.⁹⁸ They agreed to introduce some rearrangement of salaries of the telegraph staff. Some assurance was also given regarding transmission of foreign and inland messages without delay in view of which the Bengal Chamber of Commerce retraced its steps, abandoned

96. *Ibid*, 11 April 1908.

97. *Ibid*, 13 April 1908.

98. *Ibid*, 14 April 1908.

its former demand for a Conciliation Board and agreed to the proposal to give a trial to the new watch system. The striking signalling staff, however, remained totally indifferent to the notice announcing the new improved scales of pay and determined not to yield.⁹⁹

In a largely attended meeting, however, Mr. Barton while condemning the attitude of the department in dismissing summarily a large number of men, advised the men to co-operate in giving effect to the new watch system and asked them to return to work without prejudice. At a general meeting held on 18 April the decision was endorsed. In consequence, the signalling staff all over India and Burma decided to return to work and so at last on 20 April the great telegraph strike which continued since 8th instant had come to a close.¹⁰⁰

It is noteworthy that the striking signalling staff could achieve one great victory. One of their long-standing demands was fulfilled in so far as the Department agreed to withdraw the order of dismissal promulgated on 8 April and later on and promised absolute immunity to every body concerned. The men however agreed to express regret and sign an individual undertaking.

Since the dislocation in the telegraph service threw the entire trade and commerce into utter chaos, it caused much concern in the mercantile community whose chief spokesman, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce together with the Calcutta Trades Union, the Marwari Chamber, the Burma Chamber and Karachi Chamber expressed gravest apprehension at the discontent prevalent among the telegraph staff and earnestly appealed for Government intervention. The Anglo Indian press also had been feeling very uneasy about the telegraph crisis and squarely laid the blame on the authorities concerned. The hardships caused to the common people by this strike urged the nationalist papers also to express concern. *Bengalee* condemned the new system of watch, which the paper thought, would affect the health of the employees. The '*Telegraph*' while laying the blame for the crisis on the indiscretion of the

99. *Ibid*, 15 April 1908.

100. *Ibid*, 20 April 1908.

Government, rightly indicated that labour agitation was not necessarily due to seditious speeches of agitators as was being claimed by the ruling circles and the industrialists but was the result of the inevitable clash between capital and labour.¹⁰¹

The Indian peons, both on foot and bicycle, employed in the Telegraph Department also had many grievances to which was added their dissatisfaction with Mr. Newland's new innovation by which the rate of remuneration on urgent telegrams was reduced from 3 to 2 pice per message. Besides, formerly they used to get 4 messages at a time, under the new system they would have to run with even one message which they considered not at all sufficient for their own support. They had petitioned more than once drawing the attention of the Superintendent, Telegraph Central Office, to their grievances. These petitions being ignored, the telegraph peons by giving prior intimation struck work on 19 February 1908.¹⁰²

The strike created a deadlock causing inconvenience to local banking and mercantile houses. Following the lead set by night delivery peons, on 28 February, all the peons on day duty joined the strike bringing up the total number of strikers to about 500. Men on strike at a meeting held near Ochterlony monument proclaimed their determination not to surrender until their grievances were redressed. Their grievances were mainly related to the question of their pay, promotion, supply of free warm clothings, restoration of old system of distribution of messages etc. The men also demanded reinstatement of 2 persons dismissed from service on charges of being ringleaders of a previous strike.¹⁰³

The Telegraph authorities' offer of meagre increase in their wages from Rs. 3/- to Rs. 4/ per month failed to satisfy them and the strikers assumed more determined attitude. In view of the high cost of living they insisted on their own terms being accepted, if not, they were prepared to throw up their jobs, deliver up their uniforms and badges and return to their native villages. The situation worsened after the boy peons attached to the signalling and despatch department went on strike in the morning of 2 March

101. *Ibid*, 4, 7, March ; 4, 8, 10, 11 April 1908.

102. *Ibid*, 28 February 1908.

103. *Ibid*, 29 February 1908.

1908, demanding increase in their wages. The delivery peons both on foot and bicycle continued to maintain a stubborn front until their demands were redressed. The authorities, on the other hand, assuming a stern attitude, decided not to give in and some arrangements were made by requisitioning soldiers from Alipore but this device did not work well. The boy peons were summarily dismissed but they treated their dismissal with indifference. Option was given to the delivery peons to join duty by 1 March midnight ; on their refusal to do so they too were dismissed.¹⁰⁴

This strike of the peons spread from Calcutta to other parts of the country. The boy peons of Madras Telegraph office struck work on 4 March and the delivery peons went on strike from 2 p.m. on 5 March. The situation at Calcutta remained unaltered and the Department was reported to be in a state of complete disorganisation. Some new men were engaged in place of the boy peons but such a small substitute failed to restore normalcy in the Department.¹⁰⁵

The delivery peons of Central Telegraph Office Bombay, numbering about 265 joined their brethren and struck work on 30 March in consequence of the introduction of the new system. All men on strike congregated on the maidan and field a meeting on the night of 30 March and resolved to hold out for a month. The men were hospitably treated by Parsi gentlemen residing nearby. The Telegraph authorities remained as adamant as ever and a notice was issued by the authorities dismissing the men from service. The striking men however regarded dismissal as illegal and refused to give up their uniforms. This strike by the Bombay peons continued for several days.¹⁰⁶

In view of the inconvenience caused to the public in general and the mercantile community in particular commercial associations reacted sharply. The Marwari Chamber criticised the attitude of the Telegraph authorities and justified the demands of the peons in view of the rising cost of living.¹⁰⁷ *Amrita Bazar Patrika* noted with regret the gross injustice perpetrated by the Telegraph

104. *Ibid*, 3 March 1908.

105. *Ibid*, 6 March 1908.

106. *Ibid*, 31 March ; 1, 4 April 1908.

107. *Ibid*, 7 March 1908.

authorities in dismissing men who had served the Government faithfully for 10, 15 or 20 years.¹⁰⁸

This strike of Indian peons belonging to the Telegraph Department was a prolonged affair. The Anglo Indian signalling staff, no doubt, were more organised and their cause was supported by influential mercantile associations like the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and also by the Anglo Indian press. Indian peons on the other hand were not well organised and they also lacked the sympathy and support of influential quarters. Still they exhibited their power of combination and displayed tremendous determination. Notwithstanding indiscriminate dismissals they continued their struggle to force the authorities to yield to their just demands. This strike of the peons showed that in the prevailing atmosphere of Swadeshi agitation the rank and file of Indian working class was also growing conscious and was fast acquiring the courage to defy their white masters.

These strikes in the Telegraph Department marked a further advance in the development of working class movement. The strike of the signallers assumed an all India character and signallers belonging to different centres in India and Rangoon stopped work simultaneously with the sending of a code message which indicates that the strike was very well organised. And this was made possible because of the Union which was formed by the signallers themselves on an all India basis. The Union had branches in all Presidency towns.

However, it had its weak points too. Though European and Anglo Indian signallers of the Telegraph Department were smarting under hardships for a considerable period of time, as did Indian peons, they could not unite and put up a joint resistance owing to the racial barrier. This division in the rank of the telegraph workers on racial line undeniably made their position weak vis-a-vis the all powerful state with the machinery of repression at its command.

The Strike of Indian Railway Operatives. The first decade of the 20th century witnessed a series of strikes affecting the railway

108. *Ibid*, 17 March 1908.

services in India ; and different sections of railway employees—European and Eurasian guards and drivers, Indian station masters and clerks, and also workshop coolies—all had their share in these struggles. Unfortunately, the European, Eurasian and Indian employees failed to put up any combined resistance, racial distinction preventing any such joint action. While the strike of European and Eurasian employees found support among the Anglo Indian community and Anglo-Indian press, the grievances of Indian employees and their resistance movement naturally evoked nationalist sympathy ; and the nationalist press raised its voice in support of their just demands.

The discontent of Indian employees was mainly due to glaring racial discrimination between them and their European and Eurasian counterparts. While the pay of an Indian station master did not exceed Rs. 45/- a month the lowest pay of a European station master was Rs. 200/-.¹⁰⁹ They were also hard hit by sudden rise in prices of necessary commodities. This discontent found expression in a lightning strike of Indian clerical employees of the Sahibgunge loop and Asansol Sections on 25 and 29 June 1906. Nationalist papers like *Daily Hitavadi* and *Bengalee* sympathised with the just cause of the striking employees who were very lowly paid and were not given charge of important stations commanding large goods traffic. The gross discrimination, it was stated, was iniquitous and cast a reflection on their efficiency. The strike could wrest very little concession and the *Bengalee* reported that the collapse of the strike was due simply to lack of organisation.¹¹⁰

The concession granted being lamentably inadequate another serious and sustained strike broke out in Howrah-Bandel Section of the East Indian Railway on 23 July 1906. The matter was further precipitated by the rash and unsympathetic attitude of the Railway authorities in dismissing Surendra Nath Mukherjee, Station Master of Konnagar for his outspoken attack on the discrimination practised by the Railway authorities against Indian employees. The Indian station masters and assistant station masters, it was stated did not get even one fourth of the salaries given

109. *Power and Guardian*, 8 July 1906 (RNP).

110. *Daily Hitavadi*, 6 July 1906 (RNP) ; *Bengalee*, 5 July 1906 (RNP).

to European station masters and assistant station masters doing the same kind of work. The station master of Hooghly, another representative of the railwaymen, was also suspended from service.¹¹¹

The strike created much dislocation and caused anxiety specially in business circles. Members of the Indian Mining Association were complaining of heavy loss since ships were being held in the dock. At Kidderpore docks there were lying 11 coal steamers, 9 of which were loading, all delayed by railway trouble.¹¹² Highlighting the magnitude of the strike *Hindoo Patriot* observed : "the entire Indian staff.....belonging to the Howrah district of E. I. Railway from Howrah to Mankar struck work yesterday, a terrible dislocation of passenger and goods traffic was the result.....A strike on such a gigantic scale has never perhaps occurred in India"....¹¹³ *Daily Hitavadi* indicated that mere running of a few passenger trains did not prove normal functioning of the railways. The weekly statements and accounts were not being prepared, cash accounts not being checked and audited, parcels not being received and despatched in time and the passengers were not finding accommodation in the waiting rooms and very often were being oppressed by the military police. In the opinion of the paper the strike was inflicting a daily loss on the railway from Rs. 1,50,000 to Rs. 2,00,000/-.¹¹⁴ Refuting the contention of the Railway authorities that the strike was caused by the professional "boycott" agitators *The Daily Hitavadi* and *Bengalee* focussed the genuine grievances of the Indian staff which were many, such as, arbitrary and unjust method of promotion, pleasing many masters since every 'topiwallah' lorded it over them, oppression by the railway police, extraordinarily long hours of work for booking office men and deductions made from their slender pay on various pretexts etc.¹¹⁵ In view of the arrogance and indifference of the E. I. Railway authorities *Bengalee* demanded the end of the monopoly of E. I. Railway and state control of all the railway lines.¹¹⁶

111. IDN, 24 July 1906.

112. *Ibid*, 25 July 1906.

113. IDN (Indian Press Opinion), 24, 25 July 1906.

114. *Daily Hitavadi*, 1 August 1906 (RNP).

115. IDN (Indian Press Opinion), 26 July 1906.

116. *Bengalee* 1 August, 10 October 1906 (RNP).

The cause of the strikers was also taken up by nationalist leaders and public meetings were held with a view to making the strike a success. At a meeting held on 27 July at 193 Cornwallis Street which was attended by a dozen eminent barristers, a Railwaymen's Union was formed. National leaders like Bepin Chandra Pal, Shyamsundar Chakravarty, A. K. Ghose addressed the meeting. 2 victimised strikers, Surendra Nath Mukherjee and Nritya Gopal Bhattacharyya were garlanded amid loud shouts of '*Bande-matram*'.¹¹⁷ Another public meeting was held on 29 July which was attended by a large crowd of about 2000 to 3000 of whom many were outsiders. C. R. Das was in the chair and Bepin Chandra Pal moved the first resolution which expressed hearty sympathy of the citizens of Calcutta with the strikers on the E. I. Railway. The resolution urged those who had not yet joined the strike to do so in view of the important issues both personal and national involved in the struggle. Seconding the resolution, Leikut Hussain exhorted the strikers not to rejoin until every one of the dismissed men was reinstated.¹¹⁸ Side by side with extremist leaders moderate leaders like Surendra Nath Banerjee were also taking an active interest in the strike.

The broad public sympathy and support was really a notable feature of this strike. Students and other sections of general public actively came out in support of the strikers. In many places those who continued work were being intimidated by students and other Indian passengers. A young European of the Audit Department doing duty as a ticket collector at Howrah was severely assaulted by a number of Indian passengers. At Bally when certain fish plates were removed, attempt to get hold of the evil doers failed owing to the sympathy of the villagers living nearby.¹¹⁹ *Bengalee* reported that it received voluntary subscription in aid of the strikers which indicated the sympathy of the general public.¹²⁰

The management on the other hand adopted a very stiff attitude and after expiry of the time limit fixed for 23 July by which men

117. IDN, 30 July 1906.

118. *Ibid.*

119. *Ibid.* 25, 26, 30, July 1906 ; GOI, Home, Public, B 13, October 1906.

120. *Bengalee*, 10 August 1906 (RNP).

were asked to join their duty, a lockout was declared. Since very few responded, hundreds of employees were dismissed.¹²¹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika* characterised this action of the E. I. Railway authorities as unjust and illogical.¹²²

Nevertheless the strikers on the E. I. Railway held on and stood firm. *Daily Hitavadi* of 30 July reported 'East Indian Railway strike continues unchanged. The goods traffic is almost at a standstill'.¹²³

In the meantime the movement of the railway employees and the organisation of the Railwaymen's Union began to spread. A memorial on behalf of 900 Asansol employees demanded reinstatement of their Howrah comrades, equal pay for Indian and white foremen, a 50 p.c. rise in the wages of workshop hands and grain compensation allowance.¹²⁴

On 27 August the situation took a serious turn at the big railway centre at Jamalpur. Over 10,000 workmen were coming out of the workshop to attend a big gathering when they were fired upon by Sergeant Macmillan and Henderson as a result of which 6 labourers were wounded, 2 of them seriously. This rash action of the Englishmen which the coolies did never suspect provoked them and they struck work. On the next day 13,000 men gathered outside the workshop and wanted to know why they had been shot at by the *Feringhis* and insisted that Macmillan and the time keeper be handed over to them.¹²⁵ Since the mill *babus* also joined the strike, the Loco Superintendent finding work impossible declared a lockout for a week. At the intervention of the Loco Superintendent the workmen ultimately resumed work on September without giving up their demands for full payment for the period

121. IDN, 25 July 1906.

122. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 August 1906.

123. *Daily Hitavadi*, 30 July 1906 (RNP). It is reported that Mr. Dring exclaimed: "what a terrible thing this is! Losses have been sustained to the tune of 26 lakhs of rupees.....I did not know before that the natives worth Rs. 15/- had so much spirit in them!" — *Sandhya*, 15 August 1906 (RNP).

124. GOI, Home, Public, B 13 October 1906; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.* pp. 218-19.

125. *Sandhya*, 30 August 1906 (RNP).

of closure, grain compensation and removal of the unpopular time keeper.¹²⁶

Though in broad day light 6 coolies were shot at within the workshop premises, the accused were discharged for want of evidence only because the aggressors were Europeans. The nationalist press was full of indignation at this gross violation of justice.¹²⁷ A police report dated 25 September 1906 accused Calcutta agitators of wishing to get control of all the railway employees and following the Russian example to add 'general strike' to their armoury.¹²⁸

The benefits conceded by the Railway authorities were however gradually withdrawn and as a result there was another strike at Jamalpur on 15 November 1906. 3000 workmen refused to work unless Sunday wages were paid. Transfer of Macmillan on increased pay to some other department and deduction of their pay for the 4 days they had been on strike also had caused great dissatisfaction.¹²⁹

Discontent of the railway employees was vented again on 5 September 1906 when the whole of the station clerical staff at Asansol and Dhanbad struck work after giving 48 hours' notice. The strike was joined by all the clerks of the Traffic Department at Asansol, most of those in the Locomotive Department and men on stations along the line near Asansol, their main grievances being harshness of the E. I. Railway authorities in not taking back the Howrah strikers.¹³⁰

European and Eurasian employees of the E. I. Railway at Asansol were determined to create disturbance ; and they tried to

126. GOI, Home, Public B 65-67, February 1907.

127. *Hindoo Patriot*, 31 August 1906 (RNP)

Condemning the attitude of the *Pioneer, Telegraph* posed the question : Does our contemporary mean to say that firing at and wounding the poor coolies count for nothing ? Coolies are coolies, black beasts they are, always to be kept under foot, crushed, crumpled, shot at, kicked at by whitemen—are n't they ? But the coolies are human beasts and know when and how to turn round. —*Telegraph* 1 September 1906 (RNP).

128. GOI, Home, Public B 13, October 1906.

129. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* 17 November 1906 (RNP).

130. GOI, Home, Public, A 1-5, April 1907 ; IDN, 6 September 1906.

interrupt a meeting of the strikers held on 5 September under the presidentship of Mr. A. C. Banerjee. The passive resistance of Indians frustrated their nefarious design.¹³¹

The strike was, however, gradually dying out. The authorities took a very stern attitude and prosecuted the principal movers for absenting themselves from duty without permission. 19 leaders of the strikers were prosecuted and several notices of dismissals had also been served.¹³²

The workers in other railway workshops also were getting restive, their main grievances being high price of rice in the bazaar and absence of any grain compensation allowance. Mention may be made of a 3 day strike from 4 to 6 September 1906 at the Bengal Nagpur Railway Workshop at Kharagpur.¹³³ At a large meeting held in the evening of 3 September the workmen were urged by their leaders to join the strike. Religious rites were invoked for both the Hindus and the Muslims to induce them to participate in the strike. It was declared that no one should attend work the following day ; non-compliance would invoke the penalty in case of Hindus of being made to eat cow's meat and in case of Muslims pig's flesh.¹³⁴

So the next day a large number of workmen gathered outside the workshop and prevented others from entering. The Officer-in-Charge, Mr. Bailey's attempt to settle affairs having failed, the Commissioner of Burdwan along with the Railway authorities in-

131. *Daily Hitavadi*, 9 September 1906 (RNP) ; IDN, 11 September 1906.

132. *Ibid*, 8, 11 September 1906.

133. In this connection we may take note of a petition written in Bengali addressed to the Agent, Bengal Nagpur Railway from Indian staff of the BNR which shows how the hard pressed railway workers were becoming conscious of the wrongs done to their countrymen by the foreigners and their helplessness in the face of such injustice ! In the petition it was stated : We do beg leave to most emphatically and solemnly declare that we have nothing to do with any agitation or agitator. Ill fed, ill paid, illiterate and overworked drudger as we are we have neither the time nor capacity, energy nor inclination to take part in any agitation or be the instrument in hands of any agitator though we may keenly feel the political wrongs and injustice done to our people and country—IDN, 31 August 1906.

134. GOI, Home, Public, A 70-75, December 1906.

interviewed the strikers to ascertain their grievances. The striking workmen could achieve some success. They were informed that though the Railway authorities were not prepared to grant any grain allowance they were making private arrangements to keep down the price in the bazaar. On the basis of this the men agreed to return to work and from the morning of 7 September the workshop started to function normally.¹³⁵

Another such strike was organised by Indian employees at the Railway workshop at Beliaghata on the Southern Section of the Eastern Bengal State Railway for not receiving remuneration during the Puja holidays. As their demand was not conceded, 300 out of 400 workmen went on strike with effect from 16 October 1906.¹³⁶

To this series of struggles occurring in Indian Railways during 1906-08 may be added another big strike by Indian drivers, firemen and shunters employed on the Eastern Bengal State Railway who were dissatisfied with their inadequate pay and allowance and also indignant at gross racial discrimination.¹³⁷ A 24 hours' notice was given by the discontented railway staff to the officials and all Indian drivers, firemen and shunters demanding Rs. 180/- per month as salary plus allowance at par with the European staff struck work on 20 December 1907.¹³⁸ At Beliaghata and Chitpur Stations the strike situation was acute and almost all trains, both passenger and goods had to be cancelled.¹³⁹ The striking men were not satisfied with mere verbal promise made by the Acting Manager and so hope of any early settlement was belied and the strike assumed a more determined character.¹⁴⁰ As the men did not return to work, the Railway authorities decided to proclaim a lockout and issued orders to pay them up. However, none of them turned up at the pay office. The strike dragged on till the middle of February and was eventually broken with the help of European drivers recruited from the Army.¹⁴¹

135. IDN, 8 September 1906.

136. *Ibid*, 20 October 1906.

137. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

138. IDN, 21 December 1907.

139. *Ibid*, 23 December 1907.

140. *Ibid*.

141. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 226-27.

On the whole, this series of strikes by employees of E. I. Railway could not gain much materially. Nevertheless all was not lost. Their organisation was weak ; very often they were led by outsiders whose interest was short lived. Racial distinction also made the position of the strikers delicate since European and Eurasian employees were ready at hand to replace the striking Indian railway men. The entire scene was so surcharged with colonial and racial discrimination, that the so-called white collar workers, petty clerks, station masters etc. drawing a petty salary of Rs. 45/- per month and suffering from racial discrimination had much in common with the ordinary coolies in their struggle against the white employers and the Government. The middle class employees—the station masters, clerks etc. by and large played a leading role by providing organisation which reflected their more mature consciousness which the common coolies lacked despite their vigour and militancy. These strikes manifested the growing national consciousness of the railway workers and such coming together of the national movement and working class movement added stimulus to both.

The Strike of European and Eurasian Railway Guards and Drivers—A strike of greater magnitude was organised at Asansol by European and Eurasian drivers, guards, shunters and firemen which gradually spread to a very wide region and paralysed the railway service for more than a week. The railwaymen had already presented petition to the authorities stating their demands which included among others the question of their salary, overtime allowance, fine and also provision for rest etc.¹⁴²

Since no favourable reply was obtained they struck work in the evening of 18 November 1907 and as a result traffic stopped between Calcutta and Luccesarai.¹⁴³ At Asansol, the strikers, it appears, had taken possession of the stationyard and had stopped all trains from running. A large number of trains were already collected there and several thousand passengers were detained. A company of Leinster regiment was despatched to clear the

142. IDN, 21 November 1907.

143. GOI, Home, Public, B November 1907.

stationyard of strikers and prevent them from interfering with men willing to work. A police force was also sent to Bandel and Burdwan to prevent the strikers from interfering with the traffic passing through those stations.¹⁴⁴

The men on strike at Howrah at a well attended meeting held on 19 November resolved to be firm in continuing the strike and it was reported that all stations from Howrah to Delhi and Allahabad had been wired to stand firm. The whole of the ticket collecting staff between Howrah and Asansol also struck work. At Allahabad the Loco and traffic running staff were on strike since the night of 20 November and the drivers and guards at Allahabad in a meeting held on the morning of 21 November resolved to unite and cease work.¹⁴⁵

The strike gravely affected mainly 3 bodies—the coal agents through loss of market, the Railway Company through the loss of freight charges and the mills from stoppage of work. It also involved the risk of stoppage of Calcutta water supply pumping station resulting in water famine. In view of such total dislocation in trade and commerce the business organisations like the Jute Association, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce etc. became very anxious and made efforts for early settlement of disputes. With this in view an unofficial deputation was sent on their behalf to Asansol, the strike centre.¹⁴⁶

Despite their efforts the strike was increasing in gravity and there was complete dislocation of trade. The situation becoming desperate, the authorities tried to spread a false rumour that the strike had collapsed which annoyed the men all the more. At a meeting held on 21 November the striking men decided to maintain a "no surrender" policy and in the meantime the strike spread to Rampurhat, Sahibgunge, Jamalpur, Mokamah, Kanpur, Delhi and Tundla which meant that the strike formed a complete unbroken chain from Howrah to Allahabad. In a word the strike prevailed throughout the whole of E. I. Railway.¹⁴⁷

144. GOI, Home, Public B 254-268, November 1907.

145. IDN, 21 November 1907.

146. *Ibid*, 22 November 1907 ; GOI, Home, Public, B November 1907.

147. IDN, 22 November 1907.

To bring an early end to the strike the Chamber of Commerce took the initiative to hold a conference of the Chamber of Commerce delegation, the Railway authorities and the striking men. But as the authorities put the precondition that the strikers should join first and stuck to the decision to dismiss Guard Engleken, the Assistant General Secretary of the Society of Railway Servants, who was regarded as the ring-leader, the disaffection among the men on strike considerably intensified.¹⁴⁸ At a meeting of the strikers at Howrah on the evening of 24 November messages were read from Jajha, Asansol, Dinapore, Kanpur and Lucknow that the men were loyal to the strike and would stand firm. It was further affirmed by the strikers that nothing on earth or in heaven above would induce them to resume work if Guard Engleken was not reinstated. They were prepared to stand and fall with their leader.¹⁴⁹ The crisis further deepened as the guards at Kharagpur belonging to Bengal Nagpur Railway had also gone on strike after their petition to redress their grievances failed to elicit a favourable reply. However, the strike terminated after 24 hours through the efforts of the peace committee formed by the business community.¹⁵⁰ The situation on the E. I. Railway, however, remained unchanged and the men on strike unanimously resolved at a meeting to continue the strike until their grievances were removed and the dismissed leaders were reinstated.¹⁵¹

In view of the terrible hardship suffered by the trading community, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce requested the Government of India to constitute a Board of Conciliation. Notwithstanding these conciliation efforts, owing to the unsympathetic attitude of the E. I. Railway authorities and their refusal to reinstate Guard Engleken, the strike situation continued to be as serious as ever.¹⁵² Since there was no material change in the strike situation the authorities intended to declare a lockout after giving 24 hours' notice. The strikers on the other hand were prepared to treat the proposed ultimatum with contempt and indifference.¹⁵³

148. *Ibid*, 23 November 1907.

149. *Ibid*, 25 November 1907.

150. GOI, Home, Public, B, November 1907.

151. IDN, 25 November 1907.

152. *Ibid.*, 26 November 1907.

153. *Ibid*, 28 November 1907.

At last about 11 days after the strike started there was some hopeful sign of its termination owing to the intervention of Mr. Balfour, General Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants in India and Burma, who urged them to leave their grievances in the hands of a Conciliation Board and not to insist on reinstatement of Mr. Engleken. The men at first were reluctant and several among them expressed a strong feeling for their leader. However, when Mr. Engleken himself advocated an immediate resumption of work and endorsed the opinion of Mr. Balfour, the men at last agreed though still reluctant specially because of their concern for their leader. In a resolution they agreed to return to duty in full confidence that the Conciliation Board would do full justice to the question in dispute.¹⁵⁴ It was also decided to make immediate arrangement to raise subscription throughout the line as a token of respect for and by way of assistance to the support of Mr. Engleken and his wife.

So at last the situation almost became normal. When Mr. Balfour and Mr. Engleken reached Howrah from Asansol Mr. Engleken was given a grand ovation and the workers of BNR and EBSR also joined in greeting him.¹⁵⁵

However, taking advantage of this resumption of work by the striking men Mr. Dring, the Agent, issued a penal circular forfeiting the privilege leave earned by those who struck work in addition to the forfeiture of their pay and allowance. Naturally, this ill-advised circular caused much discontent and another strike was apprehended.¹⁵⁶

Meanwhile the Indian staff, throughout the line, it appears, had utilised the existing discontent to ventilate their own grievances. At a meeting the Indian staff complained of their grievances not having been redressed yet and opinion was expressed in favour of another strike.¹⁵⁷

In view of such a strong feeling of discontent and apprehension of another strike, Mr. Dring had to rescind his previous cir-

154. *Ibid.*, 29 November 1907.

155. *Ibid.*, 30 November 1907.

156. *Ibid.*, 5 December 1907.

157. *Ibid.*, 7 December 1907.

cular and he announced that recommendation for privilege leave for those who struck work would be considered.¹⁵⁸

This 11 days strike waged by Anglo Indian drivers and guards had a tremendous impact. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* recorded with horror the sufferings of different sections of people owing to tremendous rise in prices caused by scarcity of food grains and also the plight of thousands of daily passengers who commuted daily to offices in Calcutta. In the opinion of the *Patrika* such a state of affairs was unparalleled in the history of the railway enterprise in India.¹⁵⁹ It appears from the comments in the *Patrika* that the striking railwaymen held up the luggage train of the Viceroy Lord Minto at Asansol and detained the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir Andrew Fraser.¹⁶⁰

This strike by Anglo Indian guards and drivers once again made it clear that strikes by working men were the outcome of the inevitable conflict between labour and capital and not the creation of professional agitators as was sought to be suggested by the management.¹⁶¹

Another notable feature of the strike was the remarkable organisation of the strikers which was a source of their strength. *Sandhya* exhorted the countrymen to take a lesson from the strikers to know how a strike has to be organised and how a combination has to be formed. In this connection it complemented Guard Engleken for his admirable qualities and selfless service to the cause of the strikers.¹⁶² The striking railwaymen formed their own union; different railway centres were timely informed; several

158. *Ibid*, 10 December 1907.

159. *Ibid*, (Indian Native Press) 28 November 1907.

160. ABP, 23 November 1907.

161. *Bengalee* significantly stated that the fact of the matter which all employers of labour in the country ought to recognise was that with the development of industries on modern lines, the conflict between labour and capital here would grow more to more. It was reasonable to expect that unions of workers would be established and capable leaders would come forward to carry on organised struggles for higher wages and better condition of life for the working class. — IDN (Native Press), 25, 27 November 1907.

162. *Sandhya*, 23 November 1907 (RNP).

meetings were organised ; inspite of provocation and false rumour spread by the railway authorities they remained firm in their resolve. Their firm determination and resolve compelled the Chamber of Commerce to mediate a negotiation which ultimately brought an end to the strike.

5

WORKING CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

TRADE UNIONS ARE FORMED

A notable feature of the working class movement during the first decade of the 20th century was the forming of some unions in different industries. Working class protest agitations so far were mostly spontaneous and unorganised, barriers of language, caste, community hindering the growth of such unions among the workers. Though a permanent factory labour class depending mainly on factory employment was slow to emerge in India during the period under study some attempts at forming unions in different industries were, however, clearly discernible, and this undoubtedly marked a new stage in the working class struggle since the trade unions were the earliest centres of workers' consolidation in their struggle for vital day to day interests.

Perhaps the first union of the jute workers—the Indian Mill Hands Union was formed on 19 August 1906 in a meeting attended by 2000 mill hands at Budge Budge. The Union was led by middle class swadeshi leaders, A. C. Banerjee being the President and Prabhat Kusum Roy Chowdhury the Secretary. It appears that a long memorial in Bengali was addressed to A. C. Banerjee from 28 workers of the Budge Budge Jute Mill Beam Department in December 1906 in which they declared themselves to be members of the Union. Of them some were Muslims and some Hindus—thanis.¹

In course of time the Mill Hands Union gradually extended its field of activity to other industries and by the end of 1907 it came to be known as Indian Labour Union which played a considerable role in organising strikes in different industries. It appears that the dissatisfied workmen of the office of the Surveyor General of India in Park Street formed a labour union and had joined the

1. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.* p. 233.

General Labour Union. In view of their extremely inadequate wage the workmen held meetings to discuss means to ensure better wages, forwarded petition to the head of their department and even resolved to go on strike in case their grievances were not redressed.² It was claimed by A. C. Banerjee, the Swadeshi leader and organiser of labour that the striking workmen of the Royal Indian Marine Dockyard, Kidderpore who organised a strike on 11 March 1908 were members of the Labour Union of which he was the President.³ Indian workmen employed at Messrs. Shaw Wallace and Co's oil factory at Budge Budge struck work on 15 June 1907 on being refused payment for the previous month. They too belonged to Indian Mill Hands Union. A. C. Banerjee as the President of the Union dictated certain terms for settlement, which the Company, however, refused to accept and even refused to recognise the Union.⁴

In January 1908 A. C. Banerjee as President of the Indian Labour Union produced 16 weavers and spinners of the Budge Budge Jute Mill before the Factory Labour Commission. They demanded reduction of working hours to a 12 hour day (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.) and abolition of night work.⁵

The Muslim weavers of Kankinara Jute Mill who belonged to the Mohammedan Association, an association of Muslim weavers, also made similar demand to the Factory Labour Commission for reduction of working hours and complained about the oppression by *babus* and *sirdars*.⁶

The Mohammedan Association, it seems, was started in 1895 with the object of popularising mill work especially among the Muslims and thus to attract more Muslims to Jute Mills. But since then Hindus also had been admitted to membership and the Association looked after the interests of the operatives in general. It was of course more of a benevolent society, a welfare association than a trade union in the real sense of the term. The member-

2. IDN, 25 November, 1 December, 1908.

3. *Ibid*, 12 March ; 9 April, 1908.

4. *Ibid*, 22 June 1907.

5. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

6. *Op. cit.*

ship of the Association, it was stated, numbered some thousands though no list of membership was maintained and also it had no fixed place of assembly. The Association had a President, a Vice-President, a Treasurer and an Honorary Secretary. The association raised subscription for purposes of charity and assisted members in case of sickness.⁷

The first organisation of Indian seamen was formed in the year 1908 when the Indian Seamen's Anjuman came into being at the port of Calcutta. The principal objects of the association were to render help to the depressed seamen and to promote their well being in all possible ways. The seamen themselves were active in this Union. These workers having gone to sea the union remained in a dormant state till 1918 when it was reorganised and styled as the Indian Seamen's Benevolent Union. In 1920 it once again changed its name and since then it came to be known as the Indian Seamen's Union.⁸

A significant feature of this phase was that the literate section among the workers (compositors in the press industry, station masters in the railways, clerks in the industrial concerns etc.) tended to take the initiative in forming trade unions. This was also the case with some categories of workers belonging to the domiciled Europeans and Anglo Indian communities (guards in the railways, signallers in Telegraph Department and so on) who organised powerful unions in course of their sustained struggle.

The pressmen belonging to the Government of India Central Press and Bengal Secretariat Press during their sustained movement in 1905 formed a Printers' Union and elected A. K. Ghose and B. Upadhyay as Honorary secretaries. The union gradually extended its sphere of activity to include nearly all big presses and organised numerous strikes during 1906 and 1907. A successful 12 day strike was conducted by the Printers' Union at the Thackers Spink Press resulting in the removal of an unpopular officer. To celebrate this victory a procession was led with shouts of *Bandemataram*. On 16 June at City College there was a big

7. RIFLC 1908, Vol II, Evidences, Witness No. 176.

8. Dinakar Desai, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

victory celebration attended by 5000 Hindus, Muslims and Eurasians. A large number of Madrasi workers also participated.⁹

The Statesman Press Unit of the Printers' Union was very active. On 25 November 1906 a garden party was held at Tiljala to celebrate the unit's first anniversary where the cause of Swadeshi was propagated and President A. K. Ghose was greeted with cheers. Hindus, Muslims and Indian Christians sat together for refreshments indicating how the working class was overcoming the barriers of caste, creed and religion.¹⁰ On behalf of the Union a message of sympathy was sent on 23 June, 1906 to the striking Indian staff of the E. I. Railway loop line thus exhibiting the sense of working class solidarity.¹¹

The East Indian Railway workers also formed the Railway Men's Union during their strike in 1906 in which Mr. A. K. Ghose, Rajat Roy etc. played a prominent role and which received the sympathy and support of such nationalist leaders as Bepin Chandra Pal, Shyam Sundar Chakravarty etc.¹² In course of time the activity of the union began to spread. Premtosh Bose, A. K. Ghose, Leakut Hussain were active at the railway centre of Asansol where a union branch was set up and also at Ranigunge, Jamalpur, Sahibgunge urging workmen to join the union.¹³ It appears from newspaper report that a very large number of Indian employees acknowledged the authority of the union.¹⁴

In course of their determined strike which prevailed throughout the whole of East Indian Railway, European and Eurasian drivers, guards, shunters, firemen etc. also formed the Railway Workmen's Union under the charge of Guard Engleken.¹⁵ The union soon became a centre of resistance against the railway authorities. It appears that the railwaymen already had an association, "The

9. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

10. *Op. cit.*, pp. 213-214.

11. For other details of the activity of the Press Union see Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-215.

12. IDN, 30 July 1906.

13. GOI, Home, Public, N 13, October 1906. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-19.

14. According to *Sandhya* about 41,000 Indian employees acknowledged the authority of the union. [*Sandhya*, 30 August 1906].

15. IDN, 26 November 1907.

Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants in India and Burma' formed in 1897 of which Mr. Balfour was the General Secretary. It was an organisation of covenanted European staff and Anglo Indian employees on the railways. This association confined its activities mainly to mutual benefit and mutual insurance work. It was more or less a friendly society rather than a trade union.¹⁶ It is interesting to note how in course of struggle militant trade unions came to be formed to replace such benevolent societies which were no more than social welfare organisations.

The Indian Telegraph Association was formed by Anglo Indian signallers and Telegraph masters in course of their all India strike during 1907-08 with Mr. Burton as the General Secretary. A fund was opened to meet the expenses of the union. A song was composed indicating their belief in the collective strength of the Union.¹⁷ Different local signallers' unions were also formed, which pledged to support the action of the Central Committee of the Telegraph Association. The Association organised meetings at different centres like Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and also chalked out different courses of protest movements like going on sick list, tendering resignation by junior staff etc. All these efforts having failed and the authorities having retaliated by summarily dismissing a number of signallers and telegraph masters, the Association finally resorted to strike which was very well organised.¹⁸

16. One of its objects as laid down in its constitution was 'to avoid strike upon the part of its members by every possible and lawful means'. Thus collective bargaining, most sacred right of the trade union was denied to it.—S. D. Punekar, *Trade Unionism in India*, Bombay, 1948, pp. 17, 59.

17. IDN, 10, 11 February 1908.

18. IDN, 11 April 1908.

It is unfortunate that the strike actions of Anglo Indian and European workers though very powerful were very often marked by a spirit of racial arrogance. They showed virulent antipathy towards the nationalist leaders who took the lead in organising Indian workers. There were however exceptions. We have on record that the nationalist leader A. K. Ghose was appointed the legal adviser of the Telegraph Association and Guard Engleken, the Secretary of the Railway Workmen's Union is said to have had his habitual sympathy for the oppressed in every community. He is reported to have said 'whoever stands for the rights and privileges of his brother men deserved our gratitude and admiration'—Quoted in Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 226 f.n.

To crush the strike the authorities dismissed the President, the Secretary and the members of the Calcutta branch of the Indian Telegraph Association which only demonstrated the power and influence of the association.

These early organisations of the working class though indicating their growing sense of unity and organisation and their increasing capacity for struggle had some serious drawbacks.

These unions were mostly short-lived, set up in course of a particular strike movement and very often were wound up after the culmination of the particular strike action. Secondly, these unions, as is evident, were confined to a single industry, viz, Press Union, Telegraph Union, Railway Union etc. Trade Unions, covering different industries, highlighting the common interest of the workers had yet to take shape. The only exception was the Indian Mill Hands Union which was initially formed with the jute mill workers and later on extended to some other industries. In most cases these trade unions operated in isolation from one another.

Another striking feature was that unions were generally organised among educated sections like Press, Telegraph and Railway workers, majority of whom were literate or partially literate. Here again Indian Mill Hands Union was the exception. Once formed by literate sections common coolies joined the Union in great numbers as was demonstrated by Jamalpur railway coolies. It cannot be denied however that the huge majority of the workers still remained unorganised.

Lastly, in most cases the nationalist leaders organised such unions on reformist lines. One outstanding feature of Indian working class movement was its development against the constant background of nationalist movement, and these two movements acted and reacted on each other. So very often it so happened that as the national wave subsided, the Union also ceased to function. The working class was still not mature enough to provide leadership to their unions and make these conform to their class demands.

APPENDIX

*The Song of the Association.*¹⁹

Ho, brothers let us join in love
With conscience free and God above,
Prepare to stand and do what's right,
Strong in each others' loyal might.

(2)

Union is strength and strength is might
What though we tread through darksome night
Fixed as a star our hope is laid,
On strength's strong wing fly undismayed.

(3)

Up brothers up, the day is high,
Firm in our trust we'll dare or die ;
Now is the time tomorrow may,
Be just that movement passed away.

(4)

We have been broken, crushed, despised
And torn have been the things we prized ;
Then quit ye like strong men and true
Join hands in all we have to do.

(5)

With loyal hearts united sing
God save and bless our gracious king !
And to our Union's glorious fame
Be this our song and lasting aim.

POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF WORKERS

The political upsurge following the Swadeshi movement did not fail to influence a section of the working class which in itself was an indication of a new higher stage in the development of their consciousness.

19. IDN, 11 February 1908.

In view of widespread discontent among the workers during the early years of the 20th century it was stated in official reports that industrial unrest found expression in a series of strikes affecting the most important industries in Bengal. It was further admitted that political agitation played a large part in the industrial unrest. In many of the strikes, it was observed, professional agitators played a prominent part and the power of organisation, so apparent in the political agitation, was equally noticeable in industrial agitations. Both were new factors in the industrial history of Bengal.²⁰

On the partition day, 16 October 1905, there was total cease-work all over Bengal. Coolies engaged in jute works and coal depots as also carters ceased to work. As a result not a single cart or coolie was to be found near the goods termini of Eastern Bengal State Railway. Most offices had to close down after 2 p.m. in view of *arandhan* pledge by the employees. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported : 'twelve jute press factories, one sugar factory, one shellac factory, one gun factory and about seventy local mills were closed.'²¹

Allowing for some possible exaggeration in the nationalist press the above picture clearly indicates the common workers' reaction to the national affront. In some cases the initiative no doubt came from the employers, nevertheless, the workers too actively participated in the agitation. At the East India Company's Railway Workshop at Liluah the workers could obtain a holiday on the 16th by the threat of a strike.²²

On the partition day there was a widespread disturbance in the vicinity of different jute mills. The sub-inspector of Sibpur thana found a crowd of about 500 mill hands and Bengali enthusiasts assembled near the Sibpur Jute Mill throwing bricks and trying to instigate the mill authorities to close down the mill. They were dispersed with the help of the police. Some of the strikers of the Sibpur Jute Mills were reported to have attacked the Ganges Jute Mill to get the men there out from work. The armed police had much difficulty in dispersing them. Though ultimately order was

20. *Administration of Bengal under Andrew Fraser*, pp. 24-26.

21. Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.* p. 203.

22. *Op. cit.*, p. 204.

restored and the mills were at work again the number of employees attending duties was not more than half the actual number and they showed great unwillingness to work. As a result the authorities had to close the workshop and allow the workmen to go home. The report says that all jute presses on the Howrah side of the river were entirely closed on 16 October 1905.²³

Three successive strikes which occurred at Fort Gloster Jute Mills in Bowreah between October 1905 and March 1906 had definite political overtones. The mill employed about 9000 employees, mostly Bengalis. The first strike commenced on the partition day, 16 October 1905 over a dispute between the manager and certain employees on the issue of *rakhibandhan*. The manager, it appears, objected to the Bengali clerks and Muslim mill hands exchanging *rakhis*. Of course there was an older dispute regarding working hours. The mill authorities made an unsuccessful attempt to induce the workers to join work by holding promises of careful consideration of their complaints. The whistle was blown, and the doors were kept open every morning but to no avail. No one turned up for work. The strike terminated after 4 or 5 weeks when some concessions were made by the authorities.²⁴

The men rejoined work but maintained their support for the nationalist cause which was not liked by the European assistants. On 7 December 1905 the men at work started shouting *Bande-mataram* at the closing time and the cry was taken up by one department after another. The manager, Mr. Forrester, with his assistants arriving at the entrance of the mill at 8 O'clock found about 200 men noisily issuing from the building shouting *Bande-mataram*. Two of the alleged ringleaders were immediately arrested under the orders of the manager and in consequence other employees at once struck work. The strike continued for days together as the men refused to return unless the arrested men were released. At last when they were let off with warning at the request

23. IDN, 17 October 1905.

24. ARWIFAB 1905, Gen. Misc., 24, September 1906 ; IDN, 27 October 1905 ; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

of the mill authorities the majority of the strikers returned and on 11 January the situation in the mill became normal.²⁵

Fort Gloster Jute Mill again became a scene of strike in March 1906, the primary grievance this time being prolonged working hours. It was alleged that the strike was instigated as in the past, by some influential people from Calcutta connected with Swadeshi agitation. The alien mill authorities as also the Government viewed the state of things with much concern and on the plea of friction between some up-country coolies and the strikers a large police force was installed and 'the adjacent village of Bowreah was in state of seige.'²⁶ *Howrah Hitaishi* focussed the 'horrible anarchy' at Bowreah by describing it as 'inhuman oppression by whites'.²⁷ The stern action by the authorities indicates the determined stand taken by the strikers. With the intention to break the resistance of the strikers 9 of the alleged ring leaders were dismissed by the manager and several persons were arrested and sent up for trial. In view of such terrible repression the workers found it very difficult to carry on and work was soon resumed.²⁸

The link between the nationalist upsurge and labour unrest was evident again in the attitude of about 1200 workmen, at the Burn Company's Shipyard at Howrah when they struck work in October 1905 on being refused leave to attend the Federation Hall meeting in connection with the anti-partition agitation.²⁹

The strike of some 300 Bengali clerks employed in Burn Iron Works at Howrah in September 1905 aroused much nationalist sympathy and support. The immediate occasion for their walk out was the introduction of a new mechanical system of recording attendance under which the clerks and other assistants had to handle the same machine as the coolies which they considered

25. GOI, Home, Public, N 175, June 1906 ; ARWIFAB 1905, Gen. Misc., 24, September 1906 ; IDN 16, 27 December 1905.

26. *Bengalee*, 17 March 1906 (RNP).

27. *Howrah Hitaishi*, 24 March 1906 (RNP).

28. ARWIFAB 1906, Gen. Misc., 35-52, August 1907 ; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

29. *Bengalee*, 18 October 1905 ; ABP 20 October 1905 ; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

derogatory to their prestige. In the prevailing atmosphere of nationalist upsurge the clerks took it as an instance of racial arrogance by which the Europeans were trying to humiliate the Indian clerks. Nationalist sympathy for the cause of the striking clerks was almost spontaneous. Meetings were held and funds raised. Indian business community also sympathised with the striking clerks and started boycott of Burn. The Bengali clerks were threatened with pay reduction and retrenchment for participation in boycott movement. *Sandhya* suggested a new form of protest—mass resignation from British firms. However, despite such wide nationalist sympathy the strike by Burn clerks gradually died away. Dismissal on a large scale was followed by appointment of new hands.³⁰

Nationalist support was extended to some other strikes as well, especially to strikers who were resisting alien authorities. In this connection we may refer to the Press strike and the strike by the railway employees. Though the press employees were smarting under certain grievances regarding the condition of work, their strike in September 1905 was precipitated by prevailing nationalist upsurge and public excitement. It is reported that when the strike in Bengal press started two notices were posted ; one began with the invocation, Hail Mother ! (*Bandemataram*) and warned that any man who would fail to attend a meeting of the compositors of Government of India Press would be under the curse of having killed a thousand Brahmins. The other interdicted the use of foreign articles.³¹

The widespread strike by Indian workmen of the E. I. Railway in 1906 also had link with the anti-partition political agitation in the country. It was reported that on 21 July, the day after a large protest meeting was held in Calcutta against Mr. Morley's declaration that the partition was a settled fact, Indian employees of E. I. Railway from Howrah to Bandel struck work. The political

30. ARWIFAB 1905, Gen. Misc., 21-30, September 1906. *Bengalee*, 12 September 1905 ; Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-202.

31. *Administration of Bengal Under Andrew Fraser*, pp. 25-30.

agitators were very active at different railway centres such as Howrah, Asansol, Jamalpur etc. and were urging the railway employees to join the railway union.³²

In most cases the strikes had their origin in economic grievances. However, in the prevailing situation surcharged with nationalist sentiment these strikes, especially when organised against alien authorities were marked by growing political awareness.³³ Realising the growing importance of the working class the Swadeshi leaders too sought to draw the workers into the mainstream of the national movement. However, working class participation in the national movement was still feeble, the former remaining still far away from developing into an independent political force.

It will not be out of place here to evaluate the role of the educated middle class in the development of labour movement in Bengal. One significant point to take into account in this connection is the fact that the labour movement during the period under study developed against the constant background of the national movement against foreign domination and this factor very much influenced the attitude of the educated middle class.

It is true that the early nationalists were not very much enthusiastic about the labour question since factory workers then comprised an insignificant portion of the vast population of the country.³⁴ Still sympathy for the cause of the workers was not altogether lacking. Bombay philanthropists like S. S. Bengalee and a Brahmo social reformer like Sasipada Banerjee made earnest efforts to improve the condition of the workmen in face of tremendous odds. Their main object, however, was social and

32. *Op. cit.*, pp. 25-30.

33. 'Needless to say that if there had been no discontent about the method of work, there would have been no strike. It is equally true that discontent would not have produced strike but for the public excitement and the intervention, of Bengali Hindu agitators'—an observation on the situation in *Administration of Bengal under Andrew Fraser*, pp. 25-30.

34. Justice Ranade observed that factory legislation... 'affects but a drop in the ocean of humanity in India'—Quoted in Bipan Chandra; *op. cit.*, p. 358.

moral reform and imparting elementary education to the workers in order to rouse their self-confidence.³⁵

One going through the pages of nationalist journals and newspapers in the second half of the 19th century comes across sympathetic references to the misery of the working men in India and Europe. As early as in 1842 the *Bengal Spectator* published a fairly objective report on the Chartist Movement which was sent by Dwarkanath Tagore from England.³⁶ The *Hindoo Patriot* brought out a significant article—"English strikes and Bengalee Dhurmaghut."³⁷ The *Shomeprakash* followed with keen interest the work of the 'International Society' and wrote sympathetically about the basic principles of socialism and communism which were then being debated in Europe.³⁸

It may, however, be argued that this was more of an intellectual exercise; there being no working class worth the name in India of those days. Nevertheless it indicates the growing awareness among a section of the educated middle class about the importance of labour capital conflict in an advanced industrial society. Gradually however, as the working class made its appearance felt this section of the middle class did not fail to grasp the growing importance of the labour problem in the Indian context. As the

35. Sasipada Banerjee was active among the Baranagar Jute mill workers where he led a temperance movement to do away with the evil habit of drinking which was widespread among the workers. He started educating the workers by establishing night schools and also laid the foundation of the Working Men's Club. In conjunction with the school Sasipada started a cheap vernacular weekly called the '*Bharat Sram-jibi*' and also '*Baranagar Samachar*' to educate the working and the depressed classes. In order to give the workers some benefits of thrift he started the Anna Savings Bank, thus anticipating the Post Office Savings Bank system. His activities were not confined to Hindu working classes. In 1872 he established a special school for Muslim boys amongst the workers thus showing his wider sympathies for all classes and communities. His contact with English philanthropist Mary Carpenter gave him fresh impetus to work for working peoples' uplift. Going to England at her invitation he urged for introducing a factory act in India in line with such act as was in operation in England—Sir Albion Raj Kumar Banerjee, *An Indian Pathfinder*, Calcutta, 1971

36. *Bengal Spectator*, 1 November 1842.

37. *Hindoo Patriot*, 13 July 1854.

38. *Shomeprakash*, 28 Falgun 1279 ; 1 Paus 1283 B.S.

reports in the nationalist journals and newspapers (e.g. *Hindoo Patriot*, *Shomeprakash*, *Bengalee* etc.) show capital-labour relations, especially the grievances of the labourers and also their attempt to form combinations through strikes etc. engaged their attention. This was particularly so when these involved the workers in the jute mills, railway establishments, Government offices etc. which were under alien control.

At the same time dualism in their attitude was a prominent feature. A broad section of the Indian press and also nationalist leaders opposed the passage of factory legislation for fear that it would retard the growth of the rising cotton textile industry in the face of competition from Lancashire. Over-enthusiastic about the national interests, they conceived the factory acts to have been devised by the British Government to further the interest of the Manchester capitalists.³⁹ A keen interest taken by the Manchester Chamber of Commerce and also exemption of British owned plantation and indigo factories as also cotton ginning and pressing factories which supplied raw cotton to British industries, from the purview of the Factory Act, roused their suspicion all the more.⁴⁰

This concern for rapid development of national industries also explains the difference in the attitudes of the middle class towards the workers belonging to foreign owned industries and the workers engaged in enterprises controlled by Indians.⁴¹

39. The view expressed by nationalist papers and also nationalist leaders has been thoroughly discussed in Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*, pp. 149-50. There were however exceptions, e.g. *Shomeprakash* of Bengal favoured the passage of the Factory Act of 1881—*op. cit.*, p. 331.
40. Apprehensive of the ruin of Indian industries the nationalist leaders and publicists opposed the introduction of Factory Acts on the ground that 'regulation of working hours was unnecessary'. From the same spirit they extended full support to the boycott of British goods during the Swadeshi movement.—B. D. Basu, *Ruin of Indian Trade and Industries*, Calcutta, 1925, pp. 149-51, 165-75.
41. Bipan Chandra illustrates this dualism in the attitude of the nationalists. The nationalist leadership which extended full throated support to Assam Labour and Emigration Act opposed the very moderate provisions of the Indian Mines Bill—Bipan Chandra, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-60, 378-79.

However, as the working class grew in number and their strike struggle assumed greater magnitude, a section of the educated middle class as also a small section of the nationalist leaders were getting to be conscious of the importance of the participation of the masses, of the peasants and the workers, in the nationalist movement to make it really effective. Bipin Chandra Pal wrote in an editorial in the *New India* of 9 September 1901—'The condition of the two-million-strong class of labourers was a matter of profound significance to the present economic problem of the country.' It was from this class which worked under somewhat modern conditions that new wants and new ideas of economic progress could percolate to the masses.⁴² Another nationalist leader to understand the significance of the rise of the working class was G. Subramaniya Iyer. He noticed that the labour problem was beginning to arise in India just as it had earlier arisen in the West. He urged Indian workers to organise themselves into unions and resist what they considered to be an infringement of their rights on the part of the employers. He felt that it was organised labour that had made the labouring classes such a powerful factor in the western civilisation.⁴³

Within the factories some politically minded *babus* began to recognise the need to organise the workers and some nationalist leaders also set themselves to forming trade unions on their own initiative.

Some scholars seem to be unduly critical of the role of the educated middle class who took the first steps in organising labour. They take pains to highlight the limitations of such middle class leadership and overstress the contradiction between such leadership and the workers.⁴⁴

42. Quoted in Bipin Chandra, *op. cit.*, pp. 386-87.

43. *Op. cit.*, pp. 387-89.

44. Professor Sumit Sarkar has perhaps unduly exaggerated the gulf that separated the white collar workers and the proletarians in the Swadeshi period. Under white collar workers he places the press employees, the railway employees, the literate clerks on strike etc. who according to him 'were themselves often petty exploiters', to him coolies represent 'genuine proletarians'—Sumit Sarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-42.

In our country when the atmosphere was surcharged with the spirit

Some scholars proceed further and seek to take an extreme position. These *bhadralok* trade union leaders, they maintain, behaved as 'masters'. The Swadeshi leader was the *babu* and the workers were the *coolie*—a feudal bond that bound them together. Unions were run as though they were the leaders' zamindaries.⁴⁵

Considering the fact that the main contradiction was that between the entire nation and foreign imperialism, this nationalist middle class leadership made the foreign owned companies their main target of attack. Nevertheless, their attempt to organise labour movements and make labour conscious of their collective strength, especially their attempt to bring the labour force into the national mainstream, whatever its limitations, had its merits.

of nationalism it was quite natural that the literate workers would play a vanguard role in the formative period of labour movement. If we go into the history of the labour movement in Europe and America we find the literate workers playing a vanguard role in the strike struggle of the early period because they were more conscious of their rights and responsibilities. In this connection we may refer to E. P. Thompson who disfavours the theory of crass economism which assumes that the lowest paid and most depressed workers must be the most militant.—E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, 1980, p. 931.

45. Dipesh Chakravarty, Trade Union in a Hierarchical Culture : The Jute Workers of Calcutta 1920-50, *Subaltern Studies* Vol. III, Ed. by Ranajit Guha, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1984, pp. 140-145. Considered from the point of view of labour-capital relationship the *bhadralok* does not appear to be a homogenous class. Within the *bhadralok* there were two distinct groups viz. the comprador elements—the factory owners and managers and also a section of *babus* who acted as their henchmen. Such *babus* who were in league with the *sirdars* and acted as intermediaries between the managers and the workers were very often petty exploiters accepting bribes from the workers seeking jobs and promotion. They also exploited the workers assuming the function of a *mahajan*. The other group consisted of the nationalist leaders, reformist labour leaders, also *babus* emerging as organisers of labour. They acted as pioneers in organising the labour movement. They displayed a dual attitude, lukewarm in their attitude to the Indian capitalists but militant in fighting the oppression of the British capitalists who according to them were the main obstacles in the way of the country's economic development. To obliterate the distinction between the two groups is to confuse things, to put the blame of one group at the door of the other.

There are occasions when reforms can be progressive just as there are occasions when reforms can be reactionary. In India the Congress nationalists, who took a reformist position vis-a-vis labour played a progressive role in the prevailing condition particularly in the first phase of the labour movement when they fought for their economic demands and when they tried to kindle in the workers a patriotic spirit.

6

CONCLUSION

Any discussion on working class must of necessity refer to Marx and Engels, the modern working class having been at the very centre of their thought. They formulated scientific theories about the modern working class and its role in society. From his careful indepth study and comprehensive understanding Marx came to the conclusion that the modern proletariat is a 'historical category' which came into being along with the emergence of the capitalist mode of production.

Engels developed the same idea when he stated : 'It was only at the dawn of modern times, towards the end of the 15th century that the expropriation of the peasantry on a large scale laid the foundation for the modern class of wage workers who possess nothing but their labour power and can live only by selling that labour power to others. But if the expropriation from land brought this class into existence it was the development of capitalist production, of modern industry and agriculture on a large scale which perpetuated it, increased it and shaped it into a distinct class, with distinct interest and a distinct historical mission.'¹

Marx and Engels sharply challenged those who tended to forget class distinction and spoke about producers, the people or working people in general. To Engels, the proletariat or the proletarian class is the working class of the nineteenth century different from other working people, viz. the slaves, serfs, handicraftsmen, manufactory workers etc.²

However, Marx and Engels never treated the working class mechanically as something which appeared and assumed its full shape overnight immediately after the Industrial Revolution. Working class consciousness, in their perception, was not some-

1. F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Moscow, 1973, Preface to the American Edition, p. 20.
2. F. Engels, *Principles of Communism, Selected Works, Vol. I*, Moscow pp. 81-84.

thing automatic. The modern working class which first appeared on the scene after the Industrial Revolution developed through different stages. The formation of a class conscious working class is a long drawn process which again has variations from country to country depending on the pace of industrialisation, structure of society etc. "Economic condition" Marx affirmed, "had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital but not yet for itself. In the struggle . . . this mass becomes united and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interest it defends becomes class interest."³

There are three stages in the development of the working class : (1) as a passive exploited mass when they still form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country and broken up by mutual competition ; (2) the working class as a growing factor in economic and social struggle when they begin to feel as a class against the bourgeoisie, become aware of oppression and begin to form combinations and resort to strikes ; (3) the working class as the vanguard of the working people, is transformed into a class for itself and assumes the position to lead political struggle.

Corresponding to the stages of working class movement, as Engels has shown with reference to the history of England, there were different forms of protest ranging from spontaneous instinctive outbursts like riots, machine breaking etc. 'a series of confused' and apparently disconnected upheavals' which convey a hazy sense of consciousness to strikes which become 'a school of war' and through these they learn to form trade unions. Such experiences make them conscious of the central fact that the cause of the miserable condition of the working class is to be sought not 'in these minor grievances but in the capitalist system itself.' With the consciousness of the working class rising still higher they learn to combine economic and political struggle and realise the ultimate goal of the movement, the constructive acti-

vities of the working class as a leading force of society on a national and international scale.⁴

In his remarkable book 'The Making of the English Working Class' E.P. Thompson has narrated with much care and sympathy the story of the evolution of the English working class. According to him, the English working class, which took its full shape during the Chartist years was not something fallen from the blue, but it really evolved through a process. In this context he has brought out with meticulous care the radical tradition of the English artisans and has sought to find its nexus with the future working class movement. He has taken special care to emphasise this process of continuity. While doing so, however, Thompson underestimates the fact of the distinctiveness of the modern working class which emerged on the scene after the Industrial Revolution. In his view. . . . "too much emphasis upon the newness of the cotton mills can lead to an underestimation of the continuity of political and cultural traditions in the making of the working class communities."⁵

Thompson proposes to combat the Marxist orthodoxy which assumes the working class to have a real existence only when it can be defined as a set of men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed, it becomes possible to deduce the class' consciousness which it ought to have.⁶ Marx and Engels never considered working class consciousness in this light. In their opinion, as the above discussion shows, the working class has a chequered history. It will be wrong, they say, to slip over the stages, the years and years through which such consciousness takes shape.

It is the 'artisan' which is the centre of Thompson's attention.⁷ He has not dealt with the working class proper as he himself admits that it is beyond the scope of his book. Nevertheless some of his comments about the working class, as referred to above, leave room for controversy and debate.

4. F. Engels, Condition of the Working Class in England, pp. 17-18. 27, 250-54.

5. E. P. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

7. *Op. cit.*, p. 916.

Obviously, Thompson's book deals with the British model, which, however, is not the only model of the working class movement in the world.

The importance of the British model can not be over-emphasized. Britain is the classic land of Industrial Revolution where the peasant population had been thoroughly expropriated and the ground was prepared for the rise of a working class that came to constitute the majority of the country's total population. It grew in number at a very fast rate, concentrated in large capitalist enterprises, in cities and towns with great intensity. By the early thirties of the 19th century the working class in Britain had already grown into a social force of considerable size and power. The British working class was the first to have the baptism of fire. the Chartist Movement, though later on it ran into a reformist channel.

However, history tells us that there are other models, for example, there are countries where the working class constitutes a minority and where there is an enormous preponderance of the peasant population. Even in countries like these, the class does emerge as a distinct historical category and it plays a formidable role. The history of the Russian working class is a case in point. The Russian working class has the distinction of having succeeded in accomplishing the first socialist revolution in world history. The recent failure of socialist experiment in Russia cannot negate the achievements of the Russian working class in 1917.

The working class in backward countries can fulfil its task by alliance with the vast mass of peasantry. The working class can influence the peasantry, wrote Lenin, in an effective way since the working class itself springs from the class of peasants and the peasants (the working peasantry) have common interests with the workers in eliminating feudal as also capitalist forms of exploitation and in that sense they are natural allies.⁸ Highlighting the role of the working class Lenin observed, "the peasants being an oppressed class can be brought out of the slough of ignorance only by the class which itself sprang from the peasantry which has learned to understand the power of organisation".⁹

8. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. XXX, pp. 519-21.

9. *Op. cit.*, p. 519

While keeping the British model in view, we should also study the examples of working class movement in peasant dominated countries like Russia and those in Eastern Europe, Asia (China) and Latin America (Cuba). Again, while the study of such different models can be instructive, India cannot have a carbon copy of any of these models. It is the task of the Indian scholars to search out and identify national peculiarities which the new class has revealed in the course of its formation in the Indian context.

The British colonialist rulers were extremely slow to realise the historical significance of the rise of the working class as a social force. In the early phase whenever there was an occasion of conflict between capital and labour they obviously took the side of capital, more so in the case of conflict between British capital and Indian labour. In this early stage strikes or any other forms of labour protest were of little significance to them.¹⁰ Whenever such cases occurred these were invariably treated as merely law and order problems without making any attempt to understand the real grievances of the workers. As a result such labour protests were silenced by deployment of police and military force.

Some present day scholars who want to paint British rule in a favourable colour try to underplay the role of labour movement which was an inevitable result of the exploitative nature of British capital in the Indian context. Morris D Morris for example, decries the attitude of some labour historians, who, according to him, try to magnify the history of the labour movement. In his view the focus of analysis should be shifted from social protest to social administration; from horrors of industrialism to an analysis of tackling new problems with many dimensions like problem of mobilizing labour force, their adjustment with new technology, question of their discipline and so on.¹¹

Consistent with the denial of the importance of labour protest, this school of historians try to play down the role of the early

10. That the early British administrators attached practically no importance to labour strikes is evident from the fact that by their orders all records of the early strikes were destroyed making it very difficult for the research workers to attempt a review of the strikes during the period.
11. Morris D Morris, *The Emergence of An Industrial Labour Force in India*, Oxford University Press 1965, pp. 1-8.

labour associations as far as possible. In their opinion the early trade unions were not genuine trade unions as such. They argue that a stable, permanent effective organisation of factory workers did not develop before independence and that these organisations were unable to establish themselves as effective forces in factory industry. These, in their opinion, were got up unions, fomented and organised by 'outsiders', mainly nationalist leaders.¹²

Holding identical views a group of American scholars take pains to divert our attention from the phenomenon of capitalism and inevitability of the conflict between capital and labour. In their view "it is not the process of capitalist production but industrialisation in many guises which is of contemporary interest."¹³ They feel the necessity for a new interpretation as opposed to that laid down in Marx's *Capital*.¹⁴

Our nationalist leaders, in a sense, failed to recognise sufficiently the significance of the role the working class was likely to play in Indian history. They could of course realise that the working class was an important social force by virtue of the latter's sense of unity, their cohesion and power of organisation and that is why they were among the first to work among them and draw them into trade unions as a step towards their participation in the national movement. But their interest in trade union work was a transient phenomenon and as the Swadeshi movement drew to an end there was a lull in their trade union work.

Moreover, the nationalist leaders as also the nationalist historians had visualized the workers as passive supporter of the national movement. In their analysis the independent role of the working class, the role of the working class as one of the motive forces of history, was totally missing.

12. Morris D Morris, *The Growth of Large Scale Industry to 1947, The Cambridge Economic History of India Vol II*, Delhi 1984, pp. 666-668.

C. A. Myers, *Labour Problems in the Industrialisation of India*, Cambridge 1958, pp. 55-62.

13. Clerk Kerr, John Dunlop, F. H. Harbison and Charles A Myers, *Industrialism and Industrial Man*, Heinemann 1962, p. 28.

14. "Marx had seen a unilinear course of history, we see a multilinear one." *op. cit.*, p. 12.

The nationalist position becomes crystal clear when we analyse the stand taken by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was quite conscious of the importance of the role of the workers, and he wanted them to be brought into the mainstream of political life. One of his first battles was fought for the cause of the striking mill workers of Ahmedabad. But he wanted to support the working class on his own terms. He wanted the working class to be his camp followers, as soldiers of his non-violent struggle. He wrote. "I don't deny that strike can serve political ends. But they do not fall within the plan of non-violent non-co-operation. It does not require much effort of the intellect to perceive that it is a most dangerous thing to make political use of labour until labourers understand the political condition of the country and are prepared to work for the common good.¹⁵ To the workers his advice was 'do not fritter your fighting strength in many sided battles, but concentrate on peaceful Khadi work.'¹⁶

The Marxists, it should be admitted, made the first attempts to organise the working class on radical lines. Their main purpose was to inject in the working class a new consciousness, consciousness about the historical role it was destined to play. But in so doing they visualised the working class not as it was, but as it ought to be. They took it for granted that once the working class was born it was bound to develop into a class for itself. The specifics of the Indian situation, the survival of pre-capitalist relationships on a wide scale and the persistence of casteist, communalist consciousness in the working class were either neglected

15. Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol XIX, pp. 365-67.

16. Tendulkar, Mahatma, Vol IV, Publications Division, Government of India p. 10.

Even Nehru with all his commitment to socialist ideals was not in favour of organising the working class movement on class lines. A trade union movement was good in so far as it was under nationalist leadership. At the annual session of the All India Trade Union Congress in 1929 when a resolution was moved proposing it to affiliate itself with the Third International, Nehru said, just as it was not advisable for this congress to affiliate itself with the Second International so it should not affiliate itself with the Third International either, the Second International was in the clutches of the revisionists (who were not enthusiastic about India's national aspirations) and the Third International was under the control of the communists.—Nehru, *Selected Works*, Vol IV, Orient Longman, pp. 49-55.

or ignored.¹⁷ They were eager to point out what was common in the interests of the working class the world over. They failed to pin down the uniqueness, the originality of the class as it developed on Indian soil.

Trying to correct this imbalance the exponents of the Subaltern School go to the other extreme when they affirm that the consciousness of the workers is still at a pre-capitalist level and that a working class proper has not come into being.¹⁸ In fighting against one, the old stereotype they are building up a new stereotype which also betrays a lack of sense of realities.

These scholars have laid more stress on the criminal activities of the working class, their riotous behaviour and their casteist, communal outlook than on their collective actions as a working class.¹⁹ They also belittle the importance and role of the trade union organisations which came into being in course of their struggle. In their view in the prevailing feudal, pre-capitalist, cultural setting these organisations failed to evolve as genuine trade unions on Leninist principle and remained confined to *babu-coolie* relationship.²⁰

17. See, for instance, R. P. Dutt, *India Today*, Manisha, Calcutta 1970, Chapter XII.
18. "The persistence of pre-bourgeois relationships seriously affected these workers in respect of their capacity to constitute themselves into a class."—Dipesh Chakravarty, *Rethinking Working Class History : Bengal 1890-1940*, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 4.
Ranajit Guha, the chief exponent of the Subaltern School also belittles the level of consciousness of the Indian workers, see *Subaltern Studies*, Vol I, Oxford University Press, Introduction.
19. Dipesh Chakravarty, *Dacoity and Train Wrecking (1890-1900)*, *Essays in Honour of Prof. S. C. Sircar*, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 523-550. Chakravarty has laid undue emphasis on what he calls 'community consciousness' of the jute mill workers—'Communal Riots and Labour', *Occasional Paper*, No. 11, Centre for Studies in Social Science, Calcutta 1976. In his opinion 'the idea of class consciousness lives in the straight-jacket of Indian Marxists'—*Occasional Paper* No. 40, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1981, pp. 15, 18.
20. In his opinion not only nationalist leaders, even the communist leadership could not overcome this mentality. Regarding communist leadership his contention is 'for all their sacrifice and commitment they remained imprisoned in the *babu-coolie* relationship in

The colonial set up in pre-independence India no doubt surely retarded industrial development and as a consequence the working class population remained very small, almost an island within the world of peasantry. Unlike English working class, the working class in India could not develop through stages—from peasants to artisans in manufactories and then to industrial workers. In India there was no manufactory period as such. Since the artisan class was ruined the workers in early industries were mostly coming directly from the peasant stock. In consequence, the first generation of workers' struggle was very much coloured by peasant outlook. Workers' consciousness was very often mixed up with peasant consciousness. As our narrative has shown alongside the ongoing workers' struggle there were also occasional communal outbursts.

Moreover, having been oppressed and exploited by the foreign rulers together with various other strata of Indian society, the working class here obviously responded to the national call. Their anti-imperialist consciousness was roused. So at the given stage of the anti-imperialist movement which was led by the bourgeois nationalist leaders they naturally came under the spell of the nationalist politicians and their class consciousness was somewhat obscured by their national consciousness. It was easy for the nationalist leaders to mobilise the workers and to form reformist trade unions under their leadership.

Notwithstanding these peculiarities of the Indian situation an objective study of the history of the emergence and development of the working class reveals that the core of an industrial proletariat had formed.²¹ The fact cannot be denied that the working class

so far as the nature of their contact with working class was concerned.'—Dipesh Chakravarty, *Trade Unions in a Hierarchical Culture: The Jute Mill Workers of Calcutta 1920-50*, *Subaltern Studies*, Vol III, Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 140, 143, 148.

In our opinion, whatever their weaknesses, the initiative taken by the communist leaders to establish class based unions is to be given due recognition.

21. In support of this assumption it may be mentioned here that so far as Bombay mill workers were concerned, as early as 1874 there had been strikes in individual mills and departments and they were not uncommon in the 1880's. By the early 1890's strikes had

as proceeded by stages from their initial sporadic outbursts to more organised conscious movements ; from purely economic struggle to political consciousness. By 1911 the working class was definitely demanding recognition as a distinctly new class, a new social force in Indian history.

In the period following the First World War, corresponding to the increase in the number of workers there was also an increase in the number of strikes which were marked by a higher level of maturity. Through successive struggles the working class gradually discovered its own identity and became increasingly conscious of itself as a class. The point to emphasise is that despite ups and downs and occasional communal outbursts the general trend of working class advance was in the direction of further consolidation. That is, however, a different story which is not within the scope of this work.²²

become "of frequent occurrence in every one of the mills in the city."—Morris D Morris ; *The Emergence of An Industrial Labour Force in India*, p. 178.

22. To make the point clear it may be mentioned that partly under the influence of the Non-co-operation Movement and partly under the impact of the Russian Revolution an unprecedented wave of working class strikes began in 1918 which spread from city to city, industry to industry, province to province rising to its height in the first half of 1920 when in six months alone it involved over a million and half workers in over two hundred strikes.

—S. G. Sardesai : *India and the Russian Revolution*, pp. 36, 74.
At the peak of these struggles the AITUC was formed (1920).

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